

Mechanisms of semantic change: The case of Cantonese slang

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Semantic change in Cantonese slang

Abstract

This paper examines the mechanisms of semantic change in the creation of ten Cantonese slang words. It demonstrates with synchronic evidence that metaphorisation, metonymisation and (inter)subjectification are three principal driving forces behind the shift in meaning. It is argued that Traugott and Dasher's (2002) Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC), initially proposed for and widely used in the context of grammaticalisation, is equally useful for the study of neologisms – in this case, the relatively recent slang expressions in Cantonese. These monosyllabic lexemes are shown to have followed the same unidirectional pathway of semantic change – that is, the shift from non-subjective meaning to encoded (inter)subjective meaning – outlined in their model of semantic change.

Keywords: slang words, semantic change, Cantonese, Cognitive Grammar, metaphor, metonym, (inter)subjectification, Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change

1. Introduction

This paper examines ten relatively recent Cantonese slang terms (*ciu4jyu5*)¹ and considers them as evolving from several different mechanisms of semantic change proposed in the framework of the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). These slang expressions have been widely used among the youth and are gaining currency in the speech of the older generation. As with other coinages, they first appeared in discussion forums, teen magazines, comics and online games which mostly appeal to the younger generation. The past decade or so has seen a rapid surge in publications on a range of slang words in Cantonese (see, for example, Ho, 2005; Ah Foot, 2008; Au Yeung, 2008; Choi, 2008; Chu, 2008; Pang, 2008; So, 2008; 2009; Tang, 2009). Tang (2009, p. 13) has recorded over two hundred entries in his specialised corpus of Cantonese slang expressions, although some of them, as Tang (*ibid.*: 12) rightly points out, tend to be rather

¹ Transcriptions of Cantonese in this paper follow Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (1997).

short-lived and used by only a tiny minority of young people. Most of these publications merely enumerate the slang expressions used by Hong Kong people and only a handful of them (e.g. Ho, 2005; Au Yeung, 2008; Tang, 2009) examine these expressions from a linguistic perspective. While these studies have offered insightful morphosyntactic and/or semantic/pragmatic accounts of Cantonese slang words, they do not explain the underlying cognitive mechanisms that are at the heart of the formation of these slang expressions. The current study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the processes of semantic change that give rise to the construction of these coinages. The mechanisms of creating ten slang words which are both highly frequent and widely accepted will be unveiled with the help of Traugott and Dasher's (2002) model of semantic change. The ten Cantonese slang expressions under consideration in the current study are given in Table 1.² Published examples of these slang terms in context can be found in So (2008, p. 30, 38, 42, 52, 54, 56, 82, 2009, p. 20, 26, 44).³

The notion of semantic change necessitates greater elaboration here. On the study of semantic change, previous scholarship in cognitive linguistics revolves round two main dimensions (see Geeraerts, 1997; Grondelaers et al., 2007). One dimension is 'semasiological', which is the approach of previous work on grammaticalisation and the approach of dictionaries that provide etymologies of lexemes where attention is paid to how meanings evolve over time. Another dimension is 'onomasiological', which focusses less not on the evolutionary shifts in meaning, but more on sense relations that hold within a lexical item (i.e. polysemy) as well as across different lexical items (i.e. semantic or lexical networks). It is the onomasiological approach to semantic change that is used in the current study in that rather than examining sequential semantic change or path of change from original contentful (lexical) meaning to new procedural (grammatical) meaning identified in much work on grammaticalisation, the present study focusses specifically on the uses of a word that

² Please note that the senses provided in Table 1 are construed differently from those used in Traugott and Dasher's (2002) model in that the notion of the source meaning or original coded meaning of a lexeme in their theory would be untenable particularly in the case of Cantonese where there is as yet not much official documentation of the etymologies of this spoken vernacular form of the Chinese language. Rather, the senses provided in the table are literal meanings of the Cantonese slang words under consideration on which the innovative or creative uses of the words are based. In addition, the literal meanings of the Cantonese lexical items provided are by no means exhaustive. For example, *caap3* meaning 'to insert' here is also used quite commonly in the sense of 'to stab' (where the instrumental object is *dou1* meaning 'knife'). Another example is *soek3* where other possible literal meanings include 'watery' (soup) and 'thin' (physique) in addition to the one listed in the table 'to pare or peel'. The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing these out. See also footnote 13.

³ At present only examples from published sources (print materials or websites) – rather than anecdotal evidence from casual conversations – are included in the paper in line with the editorial policy of the Oxford English Dictionary regarding the usefulness of supporting illustrative quotations for a new word (<https://public.oed.com/contribute-to-the-oed/>).

expands over time leading to polysemy, and attempts to explore how these related senses could be explained with the help of the theoretical model of invited inferencing proposed by Traugott and associates. As Traugott (2017, p. 10) forcefully argues, “[a]lthough originally discussed mainly with reference to grammaticalisation, invited inferencing is conceived as a major motivation for semantic change in general”, which encompasses those contexts in which individual speakers innovate when they use language creatively.

The study of semantic change has progressed substantially in the last three decades or so (Sweetser, 1990; Heine et al., 1991; Traugott & Heine, 1991; Heine, 1993; Bybee et al., 1994; Traugott & Dasher, 2002; Heine & Kutera, 2002; Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Joseph & Janda, 2003; Narrog & Heine, 2011; Traugott, 2012; among many others). Specifically, a myriad of studies have remarkably enhanced our understanding of the cause and pathway of semantic change in a large array of languages, focusing on a whole range of grammatical categories: for example, variable marking of the motion verb *salir(se)* in Mexican Spanish (Aaron & Cacoullos, 2005); verbs in Chinese (Xing, 2006); the quotative *tte* in Japanese (Suzuki, 2007); the middle construction (Davidse & Heyvaert, 2007), the existential construction (Breivik & Martínez-Insua, 2008; Yaguchi, 2010), adjectives (van Linden, 2010), and the noun phrase in English (Ghesquière, 2014); Korean honorifics (Park, 2010); causal conjunctions in Dutch, French and Italian (Fagard & Degand, 2010; Evers-Vermeul et al., 2011); finite and non-finite complements of perception and causation verbs in Portuguese (Vesterinen, 2010); modal particles in German (Diewald, 2011); degree words in English and Dutch (Ghesquière & Van de Velde, 2011); discourse markers in English and French (Simon-Vandenberghe & Willems, 2011); the particle *faan1* in Cantonese (Chor, 2013).

The huge volume of diachronic, grammatical studies has enabled linguists to better understand the way language evolves through a process known as *grammaticalisation* (see, e.g., Horie, 2007; Davidse et al., 2010; Loureiro-Porto, 2012; Rhee, 2012; Visconti, 2013; Brems et al., 2014; Bisang, 2015). They have shown that this phenomenon, transforming lexical items into grammatical ones, and grammatical items into yet more grammatical ones, appears to work in similar ways in all languages studied to this day. Not only do most researchers agree that semantic change is partially motivated by grammaticalisation, but they also maintain that semantic change tends to interact with a pragmatic-semantic process known as *subjectification* “whereby meanings become increasingly based on the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude towards the proposition, in other words, towards what the speaker is talking about” (Traugott, 1989, p. 35). Later, Traugott and Dasher (2002) expanded the study of subjectification and proposed that the process often

goes beyond subjective meanings towards meanings concerned with the interaction between speaker and hearer (*intersubjectification*) and developed the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC) “to account for the conventionalising of pragmatic meanings and their reanalysis as semantic meanings. Differently put, historically there is a path from coded meaning to utterance-token meaning to utterance-type, pragmatically polysemous meanings to new semantically polysemous (coded) meanings” (Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 35). Although the IITSC appears to be a constructive model in regulating the path of semantic change in the diachronic development of grammatical categories, the question that remains is whether the IITSC can also account for semantic change in other linguistic phenomena, such as lexical innovations of slang, which will be addressed in the present study.

While earlier studies tend to identify grammaticalisation with subjectification, this paper endorses the view that grammaticalisation and subjectification are not identical (see Diwald, 2011 for a full set of arguments for the distinction between grammaticalisation and subjectification). To put it simply, grammaticalisation is a complex, multilayered type of language change, which does not consist of a single process but a set of interacting processes including semantic, syntactic and phonological processes (Traugott, 2003, p. 644). (Inter)subjectification, by contrast, is a specific type of semantic change, leading to meanings based in the speaker’s evaluative judgment of the proposition. Though subjectification is often found as one component of grammaticalisation processes, it is independent of and not restricted to it; “subjectification is not limited to grammaticalisation” (Traugott, 2003, p. 633-634). In this study, (inter)subjectification will be shown to be an important mechanism in the synchronic development of ten slang expressions in Cantonese.

Table 1. Ten common Cantonese slang terms with non-literal meanings

Lexemes	Literal meaning	Non-literal meaning
剗 <i>gaai3</i>	‘to cut’	‘to pick up a sexual partner’
閃 <i>sim2</i>	‘to flash’	‘to scam or leave in a hurry’
削 <i>soek3</i>	‘to pare or peel’, i.e. ‘to remove an outer layer’	‘to be ineffective’
插 <i>caap3</i>	‘to insert’	‘to chide’
摺 <i>zip3</i>	‘to fold’	‘to be reclusive’
燻 <i>lo3</i>	‘a burning smell’	‘to feel embarrassed/ashamed’
灰 <i>fui1</i>	‘ash; grey’	‘to be unhappy and without hope’
搥 <i>zeot1</i>	‘to rub’	‘to pressurise sb. into doing sth.’
冚 <i>gwing2</i>	‘to shine (archaic)’	‘to gape; to despair’
温 <i>wan1</i>	‘to warm’	‘to enhance a romantic relationship’

2. Metaphorisation and metonymisation

As noted above, the regularity in semantic change has so far been most conspicuous in the lexemes which are typically associated with grammaticalisation. However, Traugott and Dasher's (2002) framework of semantic change is by no means applicable only to the study of grammaticalisation. As Traugott and Dasher (2002, p. 3) so rightly point out, "lexemes that are verbal and (in relevant languages) adjectival or adverbial also exhibit regular patterns of semantic change." They suggest that the semantic changes of lexical items tend to be triggered by "changing lifestyles and ideologies" (*ibid.*), leading to changes in the social construction of the referent denoted by the lexical item. More often than not, the meanings attached to the words referring to them have changed over time in ways that reflect the conscious decision made by certain communities or subgroups of a community for group identity and solidarity. This is especially true of Cantonese slang. The slang words under consideration in this paper are all existing words which have been assigned a non-literal meaning by the younger generation. The shift in meaning serves as a significant marker of identity rather than simply a marker of change in reference.

Another merit of Traugott and Dasher's model of semantic change that lends itself well to the synchronic study of Cantonese slang is that it specifies the mechanisms by which semantic change comes about: metaphorisation and metonymisation (at the micro-level), and subjectification and intersubjectification (at the macro-level). At the micro-level, each instance of semantic change is highly context-induced and culturally dependent, having its own peculiar characteristics. These peculiar characteristics are largely determined by "the circumstances surrounding the actuation of the change in a speech community at a particular time" (Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, it is important that we examine each lexeme on an individual basis, carefully considering its own individual history and its own pragmatic processes such as metaphorisation and metonymisation that lie behind the meaning changes. This is the prime objective of this section. At the macro-level, on the other hand, the direction of semantic change is highly predictable in most cases. This macro-level issue of directionality will be dealt with in the next section where it will be argued that the non-subjective or less subjective meaning of a lexeme is often exploited to encode a more subjective meaning in the creation of slang words in Cantonese.

2.1. Metaphorisation

While a wide variety of theories and models have been offered to shed light on metaphoric meanings (see McGlone, 2006 for an overview), the most influential has been the ‘conceptual metaphor’ framework advanced by George Lakoff and his collaborators (Lakoff, 1987, 1990, 1993, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1998; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Kövecses, 1991). The claim that our understanding of abstract concepts is grounded in bodily experience also manifests itself in the coinage of slang words in Cantonese. In the following discussion of metaphorisation as a mechanism for semantic change in Cantonese slang expressions, the conceptual metaphor framework will be employed to infer attitudes and beliefs from these slang terms Hong Kong people use to describe their personal experiences.⁴ The etymological meaning of some slang expressions will also be considered as McGlone forcefully argues that “the availability of objective etymological information enables us to evaluate our intuitive theory about the expression’s origin” (2006, p. 116). Hence, the metaphoric account of slang words will be discussed with reference to their actual etymology and meaning below.

Given that human concepts are based directly on sensorial-perceptual experience according to the conceptual metaphor theory, it is unsurprising that human relationship and action can be represented as a set of mappings to the representational structure of more concrete concepts such as motion. For example, consider the hypothesised conceptual metaphor PROGRESS IN THE RELATIONSHIP IS FORWARD MOTION taken from the Master Metaphor List (Lakoff et al., 1991).⁵ This metaphoric mental structure can be inferred from the slang term 界 *gai3* (meaning ‘to cut’ literally and ‘to pick up a sexual partner’ metaphorically). According to the conceptual metaphor, the structure of the target concept (‘progress in the relationship’) represents a set of relationship-related entities that are organised by correspondences to entities in the source concept (‘forward motion’).⁶ Examples that reflect this conceptual metaphor include *They are at a crossroads in their relationship*, *This relationship isn’t going anywhere*, and *They’re in a dead-end relationship* (Lakoff et al., 1991, p. 153). This conceptual metaphor is subsumed under the more general conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY, which entails

⁴ Following the notational convention of Lakoff and his colleagues, I have used uppercase titles to identify conceptual metaphors in this paper.

⁵ The Master Metaphor List was compiled by the Berkeley Cognitive Linguistics Group (Lakoff et al., 1991). It is possibly the largest and most complete documentation of different kinds of conceptual metaphors proposed in the conceptual metaphor theory. The list is divided into the four main sections, namely, EVENT STRUCTURE, MENTAL EVENTS, EMOTIONS and OTHERS. These section headings represent abstract conceptual domains which are instantiated by more concrete conceptual domains.

⁶ Note that both downward and upward motions are equally plausible ways of cutting, but forward motion is considered to be the most easily recognisable and compatible as far as the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY is concerned.

correspondences between lovers and travellers, the love relationship and a travelling vehicle/moving object, problems in the relationship and obstacles in the path of travel, and so forth. The slang word 剗 *gai3* is related to another slang word 溝 *kau1* ‘a ditch’,⁷ reported to be its predecessor in Hutton and Bolton’s (2005, p. 232) *A dictionary of Cantonese slang*,⁸ having more or less the same meaning but evidently invoking an entirely different conceptual metaphor (‘the conduit metaphor’; see Reddy, 1979). The metaphoric representation instantiated by the slang term *gai3* is attested in the lyrics of a Canto-pop song called *Glass Girl* (2006) written by Chow Yiu-fai. In the song, a young and pretty girl is compared to a piece of glass, and the problems a young man encounters when trying to start a romantic relationship with her are compared to the difficulties one has in cutting through the glass.⁹

Another slang word, 閃 *sim2* (meaning ‘to flash’ literally and ‘to leave a place in a hurry’ metaphorically), employs the same source domain (‘motion’) as *gai3* but maps it onto a different target concept (‘action’), representing a motion-action mapping in the SPEED OF ACTION IS SPEED OF MOTION conceptual metaphor.¹⁰ It demonstrates that the structure of our understanding of action comes from our knowledge of how objects move in the physical environment. The conceptual metaphor entails a correspondence between human actors and moving objects, and between the way an action is performed and the manner of motion. These metaphorical correspondences can also be found in the English word *flash*, which has both the literal sense of shining brightly and suddenly as in *Stop flashing that light in my eyes*, and the non-literal sense of moving very fast as in *They flashed past/by on a motorcycle*.¹¹ While the metaphoric use of *flash* in English dates back to the 19th

⁷ The slang word *gai3* is also related to another slang word 媾 ‘wed; to reach agreement’ which has been kindly suggested by an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article.

⁸ The dictionary is a very valuable resource for the study of Cantonese slang as it offers for the first time a detailed survey of the commonest slang and colloquial phrases used in Hong Kong. The term ‘slang’ is used in a broad sense in the work, comprising a wide range of Hong Kong vernacular Cantonese speech styles in the late 20th-21st century including the language of the underworld, of teenagers, and of Hong Kong movies and comics.

⁹ The lyrics that contain the slang term *gai3* is given as follows: 我一早聽過有種玻璃少女非常尖銳，遠遠睇嚟令人心碎，點知埋身就會剗到碎 *o5 jat1zou2 teng1gwo3 jau5zung2 bo1lei1 siu3leo5 fei1soeng4 zim1jeoi6, jyun6jyun5 tai2lai4 ling6jan4 sam1seoi3, dim2zi1 maai4san1 zau6wui5 gai3dou3seoi3* ‘I have long heard about the nasty glass girl. She looks so stunning and fragile. But she really breaks my heart when I have tried so hard to chat her up.’

¹⁰ There is a parent metaphor ACTION IS MOTION (Lakoff et al., 1991, p. 26) which entails the SPEED OF ACTION IS SPEED OF MOTION conceptual metaphor (Lakoff et al., 1991, p. 28) and the associated examples illustrate that ‘motion’ is construed as the movement of an (in)animate entity and ‘action’ is construed as a goal-oriented activity. Another entailment can be found in ACTION IS SELF-PROPELLED MOTION (e.g., ‘I’ve got to start moving on this project’; Grady, 1997, p. 287; see also Lakoff et al., 1991, p. 27); these metaphors, Grady argues, are experientially grounded in correlations between “performing an action and moving” (Grady, 1997, p. 287).

¹¹ Both examples are taken from *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>) under the entry *flash* as a verb.

century (see attested examples given in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.), the Cantonese slang term *sim2* is a relatively more recent innovation. It is documented in Hutton and Bolton's (2005, p. 386) dictionary of Cantonese slang, and is discussed in a recent article about trendy expressions published on 10 December 2009 in a local newspaper *Ming Pao* (Chan, 2009). The slang word has also been used by a renowned local lyricist Lam Chik (a pseudo name) in the lyrics of a song by a popular local girl band *Twins*.¹²

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 14) makes a distinction between structural metaphors and orientational metaphors, representing two different types of metaphorical relationship between conceptual structures. Structural metaphors are characterised by a one-to-one relationship in which one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another, whereas orientational metaphors cluster around a whole system of abstract concepts and organise them with respect to spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. For example, the vertical directions are used to talk about a spectrum of human concepts: HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN; CONSCIOUS IS UP, UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN; MORE IS UP, LESS IS DOWN; GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN. The up-down polar opposition can also be found in the slang word 削 *soek3* in Cantonese (meaning 'to pare' literally;¹³ to be ineffective' metaphorically). The experiential basis of its metaphoric meaning is the conventional correspondence between 'down' and quantity/quality (i.e., LESS IS DOWN; BAD IS DOWN). The metaphorical meaning of *soek3* stems from the kitchen jargon to describe sauce/soup lacking in ingredients and of poor quality; however, it has been extended from this specialised, cookery discourse to more general everyday use (So, 2008, p. 30). The slang word appears to be derived from a more formal written disyllabic word 削弱 *soek3joek6* 'to dwindle'. In fact, the strong tendency towards monosyllabicity is particularly conspicuous as far as slang words are concerned. New words or slang terms are created from time to time which typically come in the form of a single syllable, e.g. 啞 *aa2* 'speechless', 愁 *sau4* 'worried', 潮 *ciu4* 'trendy', 索 *sok3* 'gorgeous (girl)' (Luke & Lau, 2008, p. 356).

The slang words 插 *caap3* and 擻 *zip3* both evoke the image schema OBJECT in their metaphoric representation. Mark Johnson, who appears to have invented the term, characterises an image schema as "a recurring, dynamic pattern of our

¹² The slang word *sim2* appears in the lyrics of the *Love Bigger than Sky* song (2007): 怎麼閃, 同學始終會遇見 *zam2mo1 sim2 tung4hok6 ci2zung1 wui5 jyu6gin3* 'however fast you leave, classmates will eventually catch you up'.

¹³ As rightly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, another literal meaning of the word *soek3* is 'to be physically weak', which is derived from the compound noun 瘦削 *sau3soek3* 'very thin; gaunt'; a parallel lexical relation can be observed in the word 頹 *teoi4* 'dispirited' which is closely related to the synonymous compound word 頹廢 *teoi4fai3*.

perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence to our experience” (Johnson, 1987, p. xiv). A more elaborate definition is given a little later in his work:

human bodily movement, manipulation of objects, and perceptual interactions involve recurring patterns without which our experience would be chaotic and incomprehensible. I call these patterns ‘image schemata’, because they function primarily as abstract structures of images (Johnson, 1987, p. xix).

As noted above, image schemata are representations of kinetic and perceptual experiences and they are highly abstract and thus are not restricted to any particular activity or perception. It is the abstractness, or schematicity, of image schemata that underlie the conceptual structures of the two slang words in question. The image schema OBJECT forms the basis of the conceptual metaphor WORDS ARE WEAPONS, which structures our understanding of criticisms in general metaphorically expressed by the slang word 插 *caap3* which means ‘to insert’ literally and ‘to rebuke’ metaphorically. The conceptual metaphor can be inferred from expressions such as *She used some sharp words, That was pretty cutting language, and He hurled insults at her.*

By the same token, our comprehension of the slang word 摺 *zip3* (meaning ‘to fold’ literally and ‘to be socially isolated’ metaphorically) is made possible by first recognising it as an instantiation of the image schema OBJECT (which entails a shape) and then invoking the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE SHAPES and its conceptual mappings (e.g. readiness → good shape; improvement → change in shape; group membership → fitting a shape), as illustrated, respectively, in examples¹⁴ such as *All our bags are packed, and we don’t have to leave for another hour, so we’re in good shape, She’s a reformed criminal, and It’s no surprise she’s leaving – she never really fitted in.*¹⁵ As with the case of *soek3*, *zip3* appears to be used initially in a rather restricted context as part of the university student jargon to refer to someone who is “deeply involved in their studies to the exclusion of other activity” (Hutton & Bolton, 2005, p. 217). This specialised sense is still in use but it is already fading away. Now the slang word is more likely to be used more generally to refer to a recluse, of any age and any occupation. What is interesting about this slang word is that associations arising out of a particular culture seem to play a major role in semantic change. In Anglo culture, schemata like NEAR-FAR and CONTACT tend to be used to talk about

¹⁴ These examples are taken from *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>).

¹⁵ The last example can also be interpreted as instantiating the image schema MATCHING and the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL INTERACTION IS CONTAINMENT IN A PRESCRIBED SHAPE. The Cantonese word 夾 *gaap3* ‘to match’ also reflects a similar metaphoric structure for the abstract concept of compatibility in a relationship.

social distance; for example, social cohesion can be inferred from expressions such as *I'm still in close contact with her*, whereas social isolation can be inferred from expressions such as *I've been busy at home and have hardly had any contact with the outside world*.¹⁶ The same holds true for Mandarin Chinese with words like 聯繫 *lianxi* 'to get in touch' for social cohesion and words like 疏遠 *shuyuan* 'to shy away from' for social isolation. Hong Kong culture has long been considered as distinctive from that of the mainland China and Taiwan (Fan, 2000). It is therefore hardly surprising that different image schemata and conceptual metaphors are employed to structure a specific human concept in Cantonese, as opposed to English and (Mandarin) Chinese.

The slang word 灰 *fui1* (meaning 'grey' literally and 'to be depressed and hopeless' metaphorically) reflects the conventional metaphor HOPE IS LIGHT and its corollary HOPELESSNESS IS DARK. Linguists have long noted that psychological perspectives are implicit in colour terms. Derrig's (1978) cross-linguistic analysis of hues is a case in point. She hypothesises that meanings associated with intellectual ability may be metaphorically linked to colour; for example, *white* can be metaphorically related to innocence, *black* to evil, ignorance and gloominess, *red* to anger and sex, *blue/green* to inexperience and being uneducated, *yellow* to ripeness. Indeed, the metaphoric meaning of *grey* has a long history in the English language where the first instance appeared as early as the 18th century (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). Cantonese speakers, by contrast, developed the metaphorical meaning almost three centuries later than their English counterparts (cf. Hutton & Bolton, 2005, p. 122), and used it as a slang word rather than in common parlance.

As with two of the slang words, 削 *soek3* and 摺 *zip3*, which were initially used by a particular group of people before becoming used in wider contexts, 掙 *zeot1* (or 掙數 *zeot1sou3*) is a term frequently used in the marketing and estate agency sectors to push workers into getting more business or achieving a predetermined sale figure. This slang word instantiates the conceptual metaphor PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES ARE PHYSICAL FORCES and reflects the potential metaphoric correspondences between physical strength and psychological load, and between rubbing and greater mental stress.

So far the conceptual metaphor framework has fared quite well as an account of conceptual structure for Cantonese slang expressions. There is one slang word, however, which can only be partially explained by metaphorisation. In the case of 燻 *lo3* (meaning 'a burning smell' literally and 'to feel embarrassed/ashamed' metaphorically), one would presumably identify an abstract concept ('emotion') for

¹⁶ These two examples are also taken from *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>).

which the slang expression used to describe it suggests a conceptual metaphor INTENSE EMOTIONS ARE HEAT. This conceptual metaphor provides a partial metaphoric representation because (i) the target concept is too general in that it does not specify exactly which affect, positive or negative, (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger, hope, love, etc.) that is being talked about; (ii) the source concept merely establishes a tenuous connection between 'heat' and the literal sense of the slang word, although it is rather obvious that a burning smell entails the process of burning which generates heat. Therefore, to discuss the conceptual structure of the slang word *lo3* still begs the question of how our mental representation of the feeling of embarrassment in our culture can be understood in terms of the stench of burning in the first place. This cultural dimension can be more properly dealt with in terms of (inter)subjectification which we will discuss in the next section.

To sum up, the analysis in this section has demonstrated that the different senses of a polysemous word are not arbitrary historical developments, but can be traced to an underlying conceptual metaphor. It has also shown that the conceptual metaphor theory not only fares well as a model of understanding conventional metaphorical language, but also underlies our creation and interpretation of novel metaphors as embodied in the recent slang expressions in Cantonese.

2.2. Metonymisation

Metonymy is generally understood as being a transference within a single semantic field rather than across two fields, the metonym being one (often salient) aspect of something to stand for the whole (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 35-40; Langacker, 1995, p. 28; Warren, 1999, p. 133). There is a general metonymic principle that the effects of an emotion can stand for the emotion. Kövecses (2000, 2002) uses this argument to suggest that the physical effects and the emotional experiences of a feeling could be regarded as part of the same domain. This means that describing the physiological effects of an emotion in order to refer to that emotion is an instance of metonymy. By the same token, it could be argued that describing a physical gesture that conventionally expresses a feeling can be a metonymic reference to the feeling. This is exactly the case for the slang word 𠵿 *gwing2* in Cantonese. The Chinese character of this slang word is personified in the sense that its logographic form looks like a human face of someone who is frowning with an open mouth. It does not take a genius to recognise the close connection between the facial expressions made explicit by the character form and the emotional feelings of surprise and despair, which are the metaphorical meanings expressed by the slang word. As stated in the

Encyclopaedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong,¹⁷ the archaic word *gwing2* was resurrected in 2008 by some online communities in Taiwan and quickly adopted by their Hong Kong counterparts. Since then, the use of this word has been widespread, being seen in the nickname of a local actress *Myolie Wu* (胡囧囧 in Chinese), and in the names of a local TV drama series *Twilight Investigation* (囧探查過界 in Chinese) first broadcast in 2010 and of a Taiwanese film *Orz Boyz* (囧男孩 in Chinese). The coinage of this slang word can serve as a testimony to the contention postulated in Zhang et al.'s study of metonymies for PERSON in Chinese and English that “[m]etonymy, as a fundamental conceptual process, involves both a bodily and a cultural kind of experience” (2015, p. 249), highlighting the cultural influence on metonymic conceptualisations and, in particular, the way that “the cultural experience contributes to culture-specific preferences of specific metonymies for a given target” (2015, p. 249); it is clear in this case that the physiological and cultural-social aspects of embodiment may jointly shape the metonymic conceptualisation of the affective feelings of surprise and despair.

Despite the traditional understanding that there is a sharp distinction between metaphor and metonymy, some researchers have challenged this position and argued that the two notions should be seen as interacting each other (see, for example, Goossens, 1990, 1995; Barcelona, 2000; Radden, 2000). This view is strongly supported by our analysis of the slang word 溫 *wan1* (which may be derived from a related adjective *wan1hing1* meaning ‘loved up’)¹⁸ in Cantonese which seems to show both metaphoric and metonymic processes in its development. The slang word appears to be an example of an interaction which Goossens terms ‘metonymy within metaphor’, where “a metonymically used entity is embedded within a (complex) metaphorical expression” (1995, p. 172). Specifically, in the case of *wan1*, a slight rise in body temperature (the literal sense of the term) is used metonymically to stand for physical closeness, and the expression as a whole is used metaphorically to mean ‘to enhance a romantic relationship by spending time together’.¹⁹ If metaphorical language is viewed as the product of an etymological process, we can see ‘metonymy within metaphor’ as having two stages: first a metonymy stands for an associated entity (in this case, physical contact) within a

¹⁷ See the description of the slang word *gwing2* at <https://evchk.wikia.org/zh/wiki/%E5%9B%A7> (accessed 5 July 2020).

¹⁸ Special thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁹ Hutton and Bolton (2005, p. 426) give a different interpretation of the slang word *wan1*, citing ‘to try and pick up a woman’ as its metaphoric meaning based on examples extracted from comic strips published in the 1990s in Hong Kong. The discrepancy is probably due to the fact that the slang word in question is taken in their work to be interchangeable with another slang word 癩 (meaning ‘plague’ literally) with the same pronunciation. The latter word carries the implication that the love relationship would not last for long and might plague the lovers, thereby invoking the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A PATIENT.

wider, literal context, producing the literal reading of the word, meaning ‘to warm’ (i.e. one of the physiological effects of close physical contact); in the second stage, the phrase entailing the metonym is itself used to talk metaphorically about a more abstract idea – EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS – as can be inferred from expressions such as *I feel close to him* and *He is very near and dear to her*.

3. Subjectification and intersubjectification

We have seen in the preceding section that the meaning M of a lexeme L is linked to a conceptual structure C , prior to the shift in meaning. However, given that the lexeme undergoes metaphorisation/metonymisation, it is now associated with two conceptual structures (C_a , C_b), giving rise to two often distinct meanings (M_1 , M_2). The meaning M_1 is referred to as “coded meaning” whereas the meaning M_2 as “new coded meaning” in Traugott and Dasher’s (2002, p. 38) model of Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC). They hypothesise that the speaker/writer (SP/W) may innovate a metaphoric use of a lexeme in an utterance-token. The new use is an ad hoc, instantaneous development for the SP/W, constructed out of real-time contextual needs. This is in fact one of the central tenets of the IITSC framework in that the SP/W is invited to make inferences on-line to cope with the communicative purpose of language use, and to express their subjective belief and attitude through these inferences.²⁰

It will be instrumental here to elaborate further what ‘invited inferences’ are precisely meant by Traugott and associates, particularly in relation to pragmatic inferencing which is another dominant approach to the study of innovative semantic change that arises in the constant negotiation of meaning among interlocutors. In the pragmatic inferencing approach, non-literal meanings usually emerge from pragmatic implicatures (see Horn, 1984; Grice, 1989; Levinson, 2000) as a result of mismatch between what is said and what is understood, and thus it is essential to distinguish between pragmatic meanings (i.e. inferences made on the basis of what is said) and semantically coded meanings. Traugott and Dasher (2002; see also Traugott & König, 1991) propose the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change as an alternative model, arguing that when engaging in negotiated interaction, speakers

²⁰ As mentioned earlier in the introduction, sequential semantic change used in Traugott and Dasher’s model is adapted in this study to account for the onomasiological semantic change that is being explored in the Cantonese slang: rather than tracking the trajectory, or path, of semantic change from the original, lexically coded meaning to the new grammatical meaning (see Bybee et al., 1994 for cross-linguistic paths of modal meanings) which is deemed impossible without concrete etymological evidence as in the case of Cantonese, the present study aims to demonstrate how literal meanings of some existing Cantonese lexical items have been appropriated creatively by indigenous speakers and become lexical innovations in slang.

are assumed to invite addressees to interpret what is said and if these 'new' interpretations become salient and conventionalised in a community, then non-literal, innovative meanings come into being. Traugott (2017, p. 10) further argues that "[w]hile the end result may be the same in both models, the researchers' assumptions are different. In the perception [i.e. pragmatic inferencing] model, the language acquirer is passive and 'misinterprets', in the production-perception [i.e. invited inferencing] model, the language users are actively engaged and may simply 'interpret differently'", suggesting that motivations for semantic change could also emanate from the (inter)subjectivity of both speakers and hearers in the production and perception of speech which forms the basis of invited inferencing. Broadly speaking, the process of invited inferencing entails both subjectification and intersubjectification (see sections 3.1 and 3.2 respectively), i.e. a shift in senses that are motivated by both the speaker's perspective and the stances and social identities of the addressee (López-Couso, 2010).

To summarise the IITSC, semantic change starts with the SP/W's metaphoric, instantaneous use of a code that they have acquired. Their ability to innovate new uses of extant lexemes is predicted on their ability of drawing on pragmatic meanings (i.e. invited inferences) and their expression of subjective belief/state/attitude (i.e. subjectification). If these uses spread to the addresser/reader (AD/R) and are replicated, the semanticisation will take place. Although it would be hard to prove that semanticisation does occur or has even completed in the case of Cantonese slang without carrying out a large-scale sociolinguistic analysis tracking down the extent of usage of Cantonese slang across the entire linguistic community, it can be reasonably assumed that Cantonese slang words do exhibit some traces of invited inferencing and thus subjectification in their conceptual structures. In our attempt to prove this assumption, we will consider (inter)subjectification in greater detail below.

Traugott's theory of subjectification sets forth the strong claim that the major type of semantic change is the development of explicit markers of subjectivity (see Traugott, 1989, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2012). Subjectivity is a general property of language in that it "refers to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent's expression of himself and his own attitudes and beliefs" (Lyons, 1982, p. 102). The distinction between subjectification and intersubjectification is indeed very clear-cut; while subjectification involves a higher degree of speaker involvement, making SP/W attitude explicit, intersubjectification involves a higher degree of addressee involvement, expressing SP/W's conscious efforts to respect the AD/R's face in the flow of the discourse (see Simon-Vandenberg & Willems, 2011). In the following discussion, we will explore how intersubjectification can operate at the

lexical level, apart from its widespread usage at the discourse level. In keeping with the aforementioned unidirectionality of the development from subjectification to intersubjectification, we will look at subjectification first before considering intersubjectification.

3.1. Subjectification

In the dynamic process of subjectification, meanings grounded in external objective reference change towards meaning based in the speaker's internal belief or attitude. For instance, by metaphorically expressing different kinds of emotional feelings (i.e. depression/sadness, frustration/anger, tension/anxiety), the slang words 灰 *fui1*, 插 *caap3* and 粹 *zeot1* foreground the speaker's attitude and thus convey highly subjective meanings. The verbs do not construe a relation that has reference to the physical world, but rather describe the speaker's internal evaluation of the situation. The fact that the meanings expressed by these slang words are not based on an external situation but on an internal (evaluative) one is in accordance with *Tendency I* of Traugott and Dasher's (2002) model of semantic change.

Nonetheless, the subjectification of four other Cantonese slang words is less straightforward and their literal and metaphoric meanings which show different conceptualisations of internal structure can be accounted for using the Langackerian framework of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 2008). Langacker (2008, p. 111-112) proposes that human beings are capable of viewing an event differently in two modes of cognitive processing, namely sequential scanning and summary scanning. The former amounts to mentally tracking an event as it unfolds through time, whereas the latter forms a single gestalt by mentally superimposing and simultaneously activating all component states an event runs through. He suggests that sequential scanning and summary scanning are not mutually exclusive and should be thought of as two facets of the normal observation of events. We thus have the option of conceptualising an event by focusing selectively on either mode of scanning. When we make conscious efforts to view an event in another manner, subjectification comes into play.²¹

While it may seem mysterious, the two slang words 擗 *gaai3* and 閃 *sim2* show remarkable similarity in viewing arrangement. Both of their literal meanings involve summary scanning and their metaphoric meanings sequential scanning.

²¹ Note that Langacker's (1985, 1990, 1999) definition of subjectification is fundamentally different from Traugott's approach. He is primarily concerned with perspectivisation of the grammatical subject, rather than perspectivisation of the speaking subject that is at the centre of the Traugott's approach and is the definition of subjectification adopted in this paper (see Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 97-99 and Traugott, 2003, p. 130 for a detailed description of the differences between the two approaches).

Figures 1(a) and 2(a) show the differing conceptualisations of the literal meanings of the two slang words respectively; the action of cutting ('literal' *gaa3*) and the motion of flashing ('literal' *sim2*) are nicely captured by a single gestalt in summary scanning. However, the metaphorical meanings of these two slang words (see Figures 1(b) and 2(b)) are much more complex in their conceptualisations and need more elaboration. If a love relationship develops through time ('metaphoric' *gaa3*), the most natural way of apprehending it is to track it through time across all component states. Hence sequential scanning is favoured over summary scanning when it comes to the metaphorical sense of the slang word *gaa3*. When we talk about leaving somewhere as quickly as we can ('metaphoric' *sim2*), the essential import of swiftness can be mentally conceived by sequentially scanning each component state activated at a given processing time which involves a sudden, very short motion of shining comparable to the metaphoric sense of *sim2*.

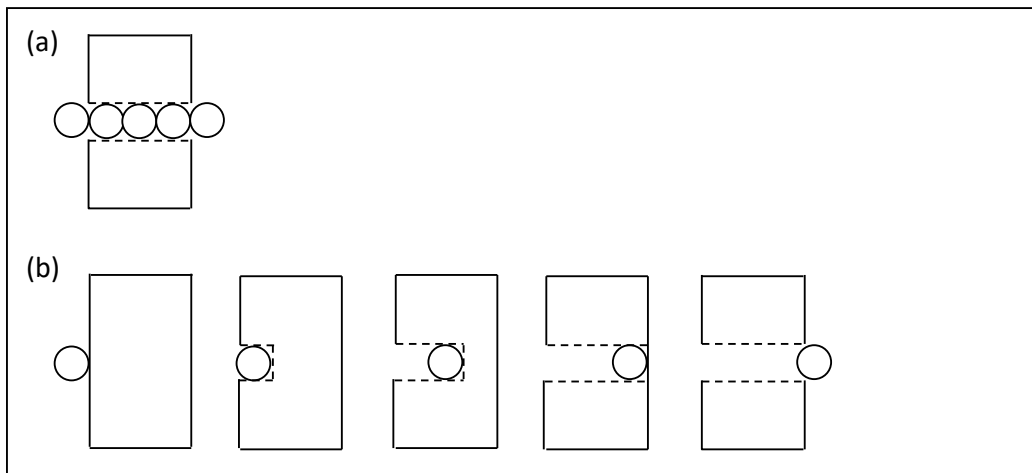


Figure 1. (a) the literal; (b) the metaphoric meanings of *gaa3*

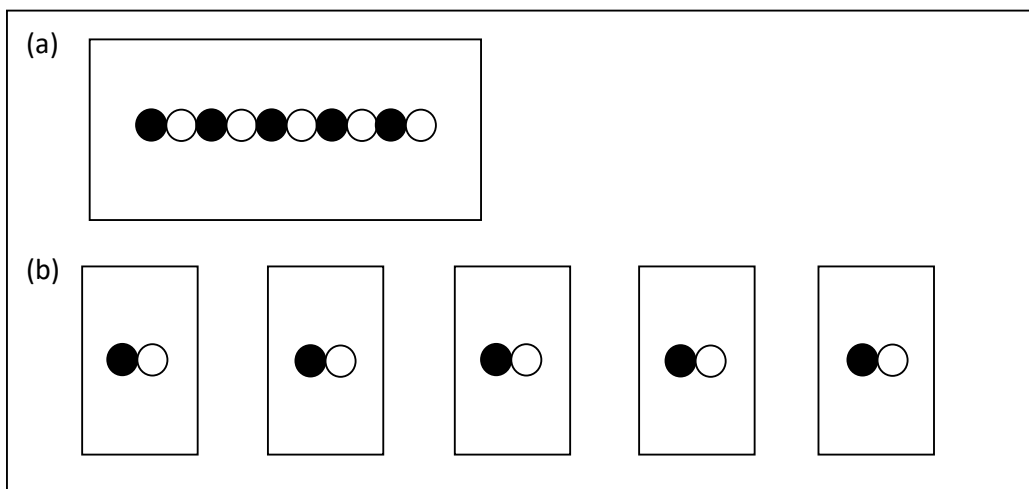


Figure 2. (a) the literal; (b) the metaphoric meanings of *sim2*

On the contrary, the literal and metaphoric meanings of 削 *soek3* and 摺 *zip3* correspond to sequential and summary scanning respectively. As the term implies, sequential scanning involves the transformation of one configuration into another, or a continuous series of such transformation, as in Figures 3(a) and 4(a). For a series of distinct configurations to be perceived as a coherent evolving scene, correspondences must be established among them, and each configuration serves as standard for an act of comparison that constitutes recognition of disparity between it and the next. Because the scenes are viewed successively rather than simultaneously, recognition of disparity amounts to recognition of change (Langacker, 1987, p. 145). This is the case for the literal senses of both *soek3* and *zip3*: as shown in figures 3(a) and 4(a), the action of paring ('literal' *soek3*) and that of folding ('literal' *zip3*) both imply a gradual change in shape of the object on which the action is carried out. Unlike the stepwise comparison of adjacent component states in sequential scanning, summary scanning includes (i) recognition of the initial state as a separate entity (with a particular shape) distinct from the final state; (ii) a comparison of the two entities so recognised with respect to their relative shape in the field of representation (cf. Langacker, 1987, p. 144). In Figures 3(b) and 4(b), we experience the overall reduction in shape as a single, coherent gestalt that gives rise to the semantic change of *soek3* ('reduction in shape' (literal) > 'physical weakness/ineffectiveness' (metaphoric)) as well as the semantic change of *zip3* ('reduced/folded-up shape' (literal) > 'social isolation' (metaphoric)).

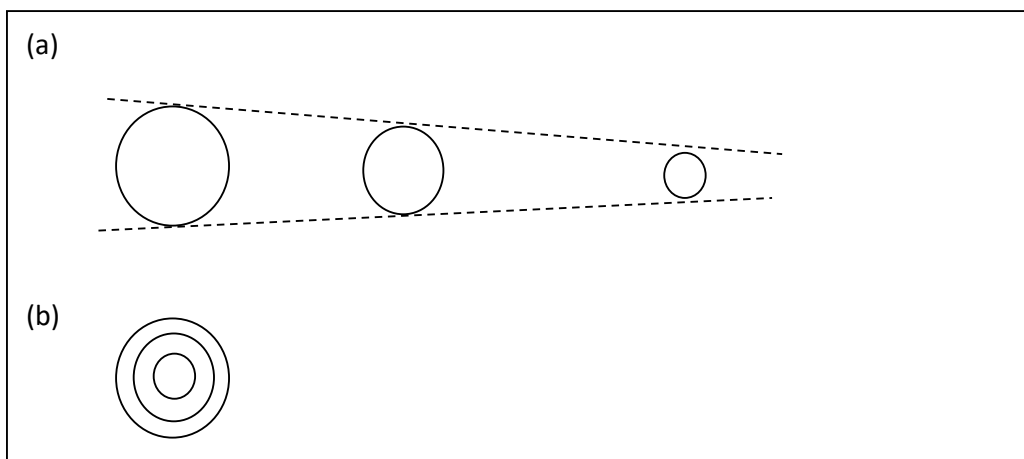


Figure 3. (a) the literal; (b) the metaphoric meanings of *soek3*

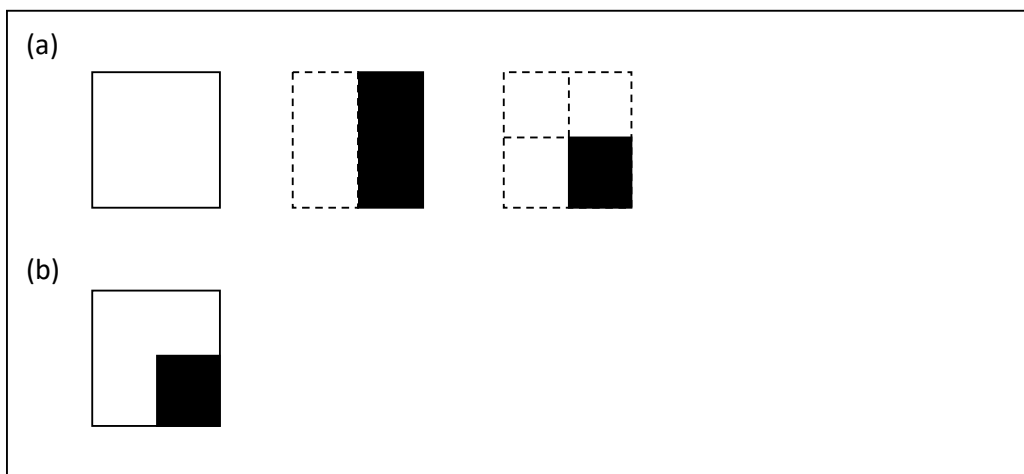


Figure 4. (a) the literal; (b) the metaphoric meanings of *zip3*

Returning now to subjectification in the Traugott and Dasher's (2002) framework, it has been proved that the internal evaluation of the conceptual structure of a slang word involves the SP/W's selective conceptualisation in favour of one mode of mental scanning over the other. Depending on which mode predominates, we can either highlight its inherent sequentiality or impose a holistic construal. The shift from literal meaning to metaphorical meaning therefore implies a change in perspective and in locus of subjectivity. As such, the slang word describes different facets of an event based on the speaker's subjective belief state towards the proposition, that is, *Tendency III* in Traugott's (1989) framework.

3.2. Intersubjectification

In one of her recent papers, Traugott (2010, p. 34) proposes 'a cline of unidirectional semantic change' (non-/less subjective > subjective > intersubjective), which represents a shift from meanings pertaining to the characterisation of the objective world to meanings involving the expression of personal attitudes of the speaker (subjectification) and then to meanings linked to speaker-hearer interactions (intersubjectification). Intersubjective meanings are then best understood as SP/W's shift of attention from himself/herself towards AD/R as a participant in the speech event. In other words, Traugott tends to study intersubjectification at the discourse level as part of the semantic change that explicitly reveals "recipient design: the designing of utterances for an intended audience" (Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 31). The present study takes a somewhat different perspective, focussing not on the discourse function of intersubjective meanings, but on the lexical meaning of three Cantonese slang words which reflects the active role of the speaker to orient to the

(assumed) attitudes/needs of the addressee.

The slang word 燻 *lo3* is an interesting case because, as noted earlier, we are unable to find a suitable metaphor that can fully account for its semantic change. We now turn to intersubjectification to see if it can unravel the non-literally encoded meaning of *lo3*. Consider a typical everyday scenario. You boil some carrots in a saucepan. The phone rings and you talk until you realise that the saucepan has boiled dry and the carrots are burnt. The burning smell hangs in the air for hours. Everybody who comes home later smells it and knows that you are in the wrong. You then blush with embarrassment. Clearly, the feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment are subjectively endowed with the slang word *lo3* by the speaker. Intersubjective meanings are also at work here. Not only does the speaker become aware of the (hypothesised) presence of the addressees, s/he also makes inferences about their attitude (i.e. disapproval) towards the described event. This is in conformity to Traugott's notion of intersubjectivity which is "the explicit expression of the SP/W's attention to the 'self' of addressee/reader in an epistemic sense (paying attention to their presumed attitudes to the content of what is said" (2003, p. 128).

Another interesting case is the slang word 囧 *gwing2*. Here the use of the slang term seems to have a symbolic function: the lexical reference of the iconographic Chinese character is indisputably literal, but also it seems to reflect something about a human character's inner state by metonymically 'mimicking' relevant facial expressions in the logographic form of the Chinese character. The slang expression draws on speaker's and hearer's shared associations between physical and mental processes, such as the connection between having one's mouth open and being very surprised, in the discourse context where the slang word is used. In this regard, the slang term straddles the boundary between literal and non-literal language and it expresses intersubjectivity by drawing on the hearer/reader's knowledge of body-mind links to encourage them to make inferences that could be seen as metonymical (see section 2.2).

So far we have considered the epistemic sense of intersubjectivity in which the SP/W pays attention to the cognitive stances of the AD/R. In fact, intersubjectivity can also be understood in a more social sense, addressing the social stance and identity of the (hypothesised) AD/R (Traugott, 2003, p. 128). The slang word 溫 *wan1* is a case in point. Most couples in a relationship would agree that for a relationship to succeed, both parties have to work at it. Thus the metaphoric meaning of the word is both subjective (dependent on SP/W's conceptualisation of his or her relationship to an imaginary AD/R and the desire 'to keep the relationship going') and at the same time intersubjective (dependent on SP/W's recognition of

the mutual social needs between the SP/W and the AD/R).

4. Conclusion

The present paper has focussed on the notions of metaphorisation, metonymisation and (inter)subjectification as they operate in one domain of Cantonese lexicon, viz, slang expressions. The primary concern has been with the pragmatic properties of these expressions in contemporary spoken Cantonese. I have argued that the source meaning of these expressions has undergone what Traugott calls metaphorisation/metonymisation, and this process of semantic change has been accompanied by the development of pragmatic, interpersonal, speaker-based image schemata (inter(subjectification)). What emerges from the current study is a picture of lexical items from a literal domain being used with a non-literal meaning that could be attributed to a body-mind mapping. It seems that conceptual metaphor theory has been able to provide a convincing explanation for why two distinct semantic fields can be seen as the realisation of a conceptual metaphor that connects the two domains at the level of thought in general, and offer a suggestive framework for the metaphorisation of semantic meaning in Cantonese slang words in particular.

This paper makes a contribution to Traugott and Dasher's (2002) hypothesis that nonsubjective meanings are often recruited to express and regulate beliefs and attitudes and become more subjective and even intersubjective. Although the use of metaphoric, extended meanings of slang words appears to be on the rise, it is to be expected that the literal meanings survive alongside the non-literal ones as polysemes. Further research can perhaps explore the extent to which slang words and colloquial phrases have infiltrated across different sectors of the language community and the effect this has on the prototypicality of meaning in the Cantonese lexicon.

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