

## On the Differences in Word Meaning between "大[da]( big/large)" and "big/large"

Jin Xu<sup>1</sup> Jianlin Linda Chen<sup>2</sup> Panpan Yu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Chinese Literature and Language  
Dalian University of Technology  
No.2 Linggong Road, Ganjingzi District, Dalian  
Liaoning, China  
xvjin2005@aliyun.com

<sup>2</sup> School of Liberal Arts  
Nanjing University  
No. 163 Xianlin Road, Qixia District, Nanjing  
Jiangsu, China  
lindajchen@163.com

<sup>3</sup> Department of Chinese Literature and Language  
Dalian University of Technology  
No.2 Linggong Road, Ganjingzi District, Dalian  
Liaoning, China  
yupenpen@yahoo.com

### Selected Paper from Chinese Lexical Semantic Workshop 2015

*Abstract: There are two major differences between the Chinese spatial adjective "大" [da]( big/large) and the English spatial adjective "big/large". Firstly, the meaning of the Chinese word "大" [da]( big/large) is broader than that of "big/large". It implies all words like "big/large", "great", "major" and so on. Secondly, the Chinese "大" [da]( big/large) usually does not have the corresponding adjective forms in English. The reason underlying the difference in meanings is distinct between Chinese and English. Chinese tends to highlight the connections between things, while English is inclined to underline the differences between things.*

**Key words:** spatial adjective; word meaning; difference

1. **Introduction.** Spatial adjective refers to those that can describe an object's spatial existence, which includes words such as "big/small, high/low, long/short, narrow/width, thick/thin, coarse/fine, deep/shallow" etc. They are generally called spatial dimension word [1] [2]. We hold the opinion that dimension is just one component of the spatial adjectives' spatial existence, which also has something to do with factors such as distance, direction, etc. Therefore, it is beneficial to rename the spatial dimension word to spatial adjective to break the limit of dimensional perspective, and then analyze such kind of adjectives from multiple angles [3]. The study of spatial adjective can be found in Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish and Yucatan [4].

Spatial adjectives are both basic words and spatial words in any language. Basic words are the best tools to understand the essential features of the lexical meaning. As for cognitive linguists, spatial words are the fundamental platform to explore the basic characteristics of human cognition.

Among all the spatial adjectives, "big/small" are most readily perceived. In other words, "big/small" are the most fundamental spatial adjectives. "big" is a positive adjective; while "small" is a negative adjective. "big" can be more widely applied than "small". Therefore, our research on spatial adjectives will start from "big".

This study is based on meticulous observation and in-depth analysis of the differences in word meaning between the Chinese spatial adjectives "大" [da](big/large) and "big/large" (large is more formal than big) for the purpose of establishing the restricted view of the basic differences in word meaning between Chinese and English, and then revealing the conceptual or methodological reason of their differences.

2. **The Shared Meaning between the Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" and the English "big/large".** The Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" and the English "big/large" share many common spatial and non-spatial meanings. By comparing "Modern Chinese Dictionary" (6<sup>th</sup> edition) [5] and "Collins English-Chinese Study Dictionary" [6], we can find that both extend the non-spatial meanings such as "large quantity", "large scale", "high status", and "great influence" from the basic spatial meaning of "large volume and area". When the Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" and the English "big/large" indicate the above-mentioned meanings, their inter-translation can be found in "A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary" [7].

(1) Large volume and area

大眼睛[da yanjing]——big eyes

大帽子[da maozi]——big hat

大板车[da banche]——large flatbed tricycle

大城市[da chengshi]——big city

(2) Large quantity

大队人马[daduirenma]——a large contingent troops

大家庭[da jiating]——big family

大钱[daqian]——big money

大奖[dajiang]——big award

The above words "大[da] (big/large) " and "big/large" indicate large quantity. "A large contingent of troops" refers to a team of large numbers, "big family" refers to a family with many members, "big money" refers to a lot of money, and "big award" refers to a large amount of bonus. From the cognitive point of view, the greater the number of things, the larger its volume and area will occupy in space. When the Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" and the English "big/large" represent "large quantity", they metaphorical project from the spatial domain to the number domain.

(3) Large scale

大规模[da guimo]——large-scale

大公司[da gongsi]——big company

大机构[da jigou]——big organization

大银行[da yinhang]——big bank

The above words "大[da] (big/large) " and "big/large" indicate large scale. From the cognitive point of view, in most cases, the larger the scale of things, the larger space that things have occupied, or higher metrics in multiple key attributes. When the Chinese "大[da] (big/large) " and the English "big/large" represent "large scale", they came into metaphorical project from the spatial domain to the attribute domain.

(4) Very important

重大[zhongda]——big deal/big time

大问题[da wenti]——big problem

The above words "大[da] (big/large) " and "big/large" indicate that things are very important. From the cognitive point of view, one thing with large volume and area often means it is extraordinary, thus is more important. Yet there is no necessary connection between size and importance of things.

(5) A person ranks high and makes a big impact

大人物[da renwu]——big fish/big gun/big shot/big name

The words "大[da] (big/large) " and "big/large" here represent that a person ranks high and makes a big impact. From the cognitive point of view, a bigger man in size generally means that he will be more likely to prevail in the fight, to get in a higher position, so that he will exert more influence. In times of war, there was indeed a positive correlation between a person's physique and his position, while in era of science and technology, there is no necessary connection between them.

**3. Differences in the Usage of the Shared Word Meanings between the Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" and the English "big/large" .** Measuring from the perspective of "presence and absence", the Chinese "大[da] (big/large) " and the English "big/large" share a lot of word meanings, but if investigating from the perspective of " more or less " , there are apparently uneven usages for the Chinese "大[da] (big/large) " and the English "big/large" in both spatial meanings and in non-spatial meanings. Specifically, the word meaning of Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" covers a wider range than that of "big/large" for the

reason that it implies English spatial adjectives "big/large", non-spatial adjectives "great", "major", "general" and other forms. This can be proved by checking the translation of the related words in "A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary".

(1) Large volume and area

When the Chinese "大[da]( big/large) " represents large volume and area, it not only describes visible and concrete things, but also describes invisible and abstract things. However, the English "big/large" are generally not used to describe abstract things. Look at the following descriptions:

大胆[dadan]——bold/daring/audacious

大度[dadu]——magnanimous

大智若愚[dazhiruoyu]——a man of great wisdom often seems slow-witted

胸怀大志[xionghuaidazhi]——cherish high goals

(2) Large quantity

When the Chinese "大[da](big/large)" represents "large quantity", it not only describes large quantity of countable things, but also describes large quantity of uncountable things. However, the English "big/large" are generally not used to describe large quantity of uncountable things. Look at the following descriptions:

大水[dashui]——flood

大出血[da chuxie]——massive hemorrhage

大众[dazhong]——the general public

大半天[da bantian]——the great part of a day

(3) Large scale

The Chinese "大[da]( big/large) " not only represents large scale of things, but also represents large scale of events or activities. However, the English "big/large" are generally not used to represent large scale of events or activities. Look at the following descriptions:

大革命[da geming]——great revolution

大跃进[da yuejin]——the Grand Leap Forward

大扫除[da saochu]——general cleaning

大选[daxuan]——general election

(4) Importance

When the Chinese "大[da]( big/large) " means "important", most of the time it corresponds to "great", "major", "general", "grand" and other words in English instead of "big/large". Look at the following descriptions:

大事[dashi]——great/major event

大功[dagong]——great merit

大道理[da daoli]——major principle/general principle/great truth

大方向[da fangxiang]——general direction

大典[dadian]——grand ceremony

In both "Collins English-Chinese Study Dictionary" and in "A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary", there is only one example or entry for "big/large" expressing the meaning of importance, and that is "big problem".

(5) High status, great influence

When the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large) " means high status and great influence, it generally corresponds to "great", "chief" or "great" in English. That is to say, in English only the word referring to people can achieve the same effect as the expressions in Chinese "大 [da]( big/large) ". Look at the following descriptions:

大师[dashi]——great master

大臣[dacheng]——minister

大师傅[da shifu]——cook /chef

大主教[da zhujiao]——archbishop

In both "Collins English-Chinese Study Dictionary" and "A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary", there are only some examples or entries for "big/large" expressing the meaning of high status and great influence, which are "big fish/big gun/big shot/big name".

**4. The Particular Word Meaning of the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)".**The word meaning of the Chinese "大[da](big/large) " is far richer than that of the English "big/large". In English "big" only has one meaning not shared with the Chinese "大[da]( big/large) ", in "uncommon vocabulary ", such as in "They use a lot of big words". On the other hand, the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large) " has many more meanings that can't be found in English "big/large".

(1) High intensity, great strength and high concentration

In Chinese, intensity, strength and concentration can all be described by "大 [da]( big/large) ", while in English they will be described separately by "heavy, strong, great".

A. intensity

大雨[dayu]—— heavy rain

大雪[daxue] —— heavy snow

大风[dafeng] ——strong wind / high wind

大声[dasheng]——a loud voice

B. strength

大力士[dalishi]——a man of unusual strength

大打出手[dadachushou]——come to blows

C. concentration

大雾[dawu]——heavy fog/thick fog

大红[dahong]——bright red

(2) Age, honorifics, rank

The Chinese "大[da](big/large) " can be used to describe age, honorifics and rank, while in English only the special adjective "old" can be used to describe age, there is no specific adjective in English to describe honorifics and rank, and comparative degree is usually used for rank.

A. age

你多大了[ni duo da le]——how old are you

他比我大一岁[ta bi wo da yi sui]——he is one year older than me  
大龄青年 [dalingqingnian]—overage youth

#### B. honorifics

大作[dazuo]——your writing  
大札[dazha]——your letter  
大驾[dajia]——your gracious presence  
大名[daming]——your name

#### C. rank

In Chinese, the rank of people and time can be described by "大 [da]( big/large) ", while in English they are generally described by comparative degree.

大哥[dage]——eldest brother/big brother  
大女儿[da nüer]——eldest daughter  
大将[dajiang]——senior general  
大校[daxiao]——senior colonel

Chinese people care much about the traditional values of respecting the elderly and caring for the young. The older you are; the more respect you will get. Similarly, when the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large) " is used to describe rank, it is closely related with its usage of describing age. The older you are, the higher your rank will be.

#### (3) Stressing or indicating time

The Chinese "大 [da](big/large) " can be put in front of the expression of typical season, time and festival to highlight their characteristics and be used to indicate time, which cannot be found in the English "big/large" and its synonyms.

##### A. emphasizing time

大热天[da retian]——extremely hot weather  
大冷天[da lengtian]——extremely cold weather  
大清早[da qingzao]——early in the morning  
大过年[da guonian]——festival holiday

##### B. indicating time

大前天[da qiantian]——three days ago  
大前年[da qiannian]——three years ago  
大后天[da houtian]——three days from now  
大后年[da hounian]——three years from now

#### (4) Great extent

The Chinese "大 [da](big/large) " can represent great extent, which cannot be found in the English "big/large".

天已大亮[tianyidaliang]——its already broad daylight  
大错特错[dacuotecuo]—— completely mistaken  
大失所望[dashisuowang]——greatly disappointed  
大笑[daxiao]——laugh heartily

**5 . An Analysis of Differences in Word meaning between the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)" and the English "big/large".** On the basis of the above analysis, we can come to the conclusion that there are two major differences between the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)" and the English "big/large". Firstly, the word meaning of the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)" is broader than that of the English "big/large", as it implies "big/large", "great", "major" and other words. Secondly, "大 [da]( big/large)" often does not have the corresponding adjective form in English.

Furthermore, regarding the usage of the spatial adjective "big", Chinese is accustomed to using one word to link up the connections of two different things, while English is inclined to emphasize the differences between two related things, which can be reflected in the following examples.

(1) Chinese attaches great importance to the connections of "space" and "time", while English emphasizes their differences.

The Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" not only represents space attribute to indicate volume and area of things, such as "大眼睛[da yanjing] (big eyes)", "大城市[da chengshi] (big city)", but can also represent the time attribute, emphasis or indication of time and age, such as "大清早[da qingzao] (early in the morning)", "大前天[da qiantian] (three days ago)", "大龄青年[dalingqingnian] (overage youth)". In English, "big/large" only possesses spatial attribute instead of time attribute.

(2) Chinese attaches great importance to the connections of "specific things" and "abstract things", while English emphasizes their differences.

The Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)" not only describes specific entity, such as "大房子[da fangzi] (big house)", "大家庭[da jiatingi] (big family)", or "大公司[da gongsi] (large company)", but can also describe abstract attributes, such as "大道理[da daoli] (great truth)", "大热天[da retian] (hot weather)", or even represent extent, such as "大失所望[dashisuowang] (greatly disappointed)", "大笑[daxiao] (laugh)". However, in English, "big/large" generally describes only specific entity, while the abstract things or attributes will be described by other adjectives such as "great", "major", etc.

(3) Chinese attaches great importance to the connections of sensory domains, while English emphasizes their differences.

The Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" can be used to describe visual impact, such as "大蛋糕[da dangao](big cake)", it can also be used to describe auditory impact, such as "大声[dasheng] (loud voice)", smelling sense, such as "气味大[qiwei da] (stink)", tactile sense, such as "大风[dafeng] (heavy wind)", and emotional impact, such as "胸怀大志[xionghuaidazhi] (cherish high ideals)". However, the English "big/large" are usually only used to describe visual impact (big cake), and other adjectives are used in other different sensory domains, such as "loud" describes voice, "strong" describes smell, "heavy, strong, great" all can describe feelings.

(4) Chinese attaches great importance to the connections of "species" and "genus", while English emphasizes their differences.

Sometimes it is unnecessary for the Chinese "大 [da]( big/large)" to correspond to a

word in English. For example, when the Chinese "大麦 [damai]" is translated into "barley", the Chinese "大 [da](big/large)" is default in English. This is related to the different ways words are constructed in Chinese versus English. In Chinese, many words represent the species concept [8]. The genus concept are usually formed by "species + genus differences", for example, "麦 [mai]" belongs to species concept when describes species. "大 [da](big/large)" and "小 [xiao](small/little)" represent genus differences, it becomes "大麦 [damai] (barley)" or "小麦 [xiaomai] (wheat)" in Chinese. However, in English, the construction of genus concept has nothing to do with species concept. Expressions like "大麦 (damai)" and "小麦 (xiaomai)" will be represented by two different words "barley" and "wheat" in English. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that Chinese attaches great importance to the connection of species and genus concept, while English emphasizes their differences. The different methodology in construction of words usually leads to the absence of the English "big".

Eg:

大米[dami]——rice  
大葱[dacong]——scallion  
大提琴[datiqin]——cello  
大腿[datui]——thigh  
大学[daxue]——university  
大山[dashan]——mountain

Similarly, expressions with “小[xiao] (small)” are absent in English.

Eg :

小米[xiaomi]——millet  
小葱[xiaocong]——shallot  
小提琴[xiaotiqin]——violin  
小腿[xiaotui]——shank  
小学[xiaoxue]——primary school  
小山[xiaoshan]——hill

(5) Chinese attaches great importance to the comparisons between "internal" and "external" of things, while English emphasizes their differences.

Any spatial adjective can be one of two categories according to the differences in the scope of comparing things: internal comparison and external comparison. The former is an internal comparison within the same type of things; the latter is an external comparison between different types of things [9]. Take the following words as examples:

- A 大城市[dachengshi]  
大家庭[dajiating]  
大眼睛[dayanjing]
- B 大厅[dating]  
大雁[dayan]  
大猩猩[daxingxing]
- C 大海[dahai]



大洲[dazhou]

大自然[daziran]

In Group A, the meaning of "大[da] (big/large)" is formed by internal comparison. Namely "大城市[dachengshi]" refers to a city bigger than the average cities, "大家庭[dajiating]" refers to a family larger than the average families, "大眼睛[dayanjing]" refers to an eye bigger than the average eyes.

In Group B, the meaning of "大[da] (big/large)" is formed by external comparison. "大厅[dating]" refers to a hall bigger than all other rooms except the hall rooms within a building. In "大雁[dayan](goose)" and "大猩猩[daxingxing] (gorilla)", "雁[yan]" refers to a bird bigger than all other birds except the geese; "猩猩[daxingxing]" refers to a gorilla bigger than all the other primates. Thus the meaning of "大[da] (big/large)" is substantiated by external comparison between goose and other birds, gorilla and other primates.

In Group C, the meaning of "大[da](big/large)" is formed by external comparison. the meaning of "大[da] (big/large)" in "大海[dahai] (sea)", "大洲[dazhou](continent)", "大自然[daziran] (nature)" is formed by comparing "sea", "continent", "nature" and other entities' general norms instead of internal comparison within "all the sea", "all the continents" and "all the nature". The differences between Group B and Group C is that the compared objects of "大[da] (big/large)" in group B belong to the same category, but the compared objects of "大[da] (big/large)" in group C are unrestricted by categories and attributes, they are various things in the boundless universe.

In general the expressions with "大[da](big/large)" formed by internal comparison all correspond to the expressions with "小[xiao] (small/little)", such as "小城市[xiaochengshi] (small city)", "小家庭[xiaojiating] (small family)", "小眼睛[xiaoyanjing] (small eyes)". However, the external comparing expressions with "大[da] (big/large)" all do not correspond to the expressions with "小[xiao] (small/little)". For instance "小厅[xiaoting]", "小雁[xiaoyan]", "小猩猩[xiaoxingxing]", "小海[xiaohai]", "小洲[xiaozhou]", and "小自然[xiaoziran]" in Chinese are all unnatural or absent.

Chinese pay attention to the comparison of internal and external of things so that the Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" not only has internal comparison type, but also has external comparison type. However, in English, internal comparison generally conducts within the same category, and the external comparison type of "大[da] (big/large)" is in a default. Look at the following examples:

大厅[dating]—— hall

大雁[dayan]——wild goose

大猩猩[daxingxing]——top notch

大海[dahai]——sea

大洲[dazhou]——continent

大自然[daziran]——nature

6. **Conclusions.** There is cross-linguistic generality of the word meanings in the Chinese-English spatial adjectives "big", they all extend from spatial meanings to

non-spatial meanings. At the same time, there are obvious lexical differences between the Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" and the English "big/large". The meanings of the Chinese "大[da] (big/large)" are more flexible and broader usage, compared to the usage of "big/large" in English. Whether these differences exist in all the spatial adjectives remains to be further research.

**Acknowledgment.** This work is supported by the 2013 Social Science Fund Program in Liaoning Province "Metaphor Research of Chinese Spatial Adjective" (project number: L13DYY058)

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ren Yongjun, An analysis of dimensional adjectives on word meaning in Modern Chinese , Master's thesis in Yanbian University ,pp1,2000. (in Chinese)
- [2] Zhu Lihua, The metaphorical projection of dimensional adjective "big" in attributive, Hunan Social science,vol.49,no.6,pp165, 2011. (in Chinese)
- [3] Xu Jin, The spatial amount of spatial adjectives ,Chinese Linguistics, pp13-18, vol.49,no.1,2015. (in Chinese)
- [4] Chen shunting, Corpus-driven contrastive study of dimensional adjectives: the case of "高[xiao](high/tall) and "HIGH TALL", Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal, pp14-20,vol.138,no.5, 2010. (in Chinese)
- [5] Modern Chinese Dictionary (6<sup>th</sup> edition), Beijing: the commercial Press, 2012.
- [6] Collins English-Chinese Study Dictionary, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011.
- [7] A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [8] Cai Jigang, Contrastive study on English-Chinese lexicon, Shanghai: Fudan University Press, pp46-49, 2008. (in Chinese)
- [9] Chen Qingsong, On the Relational Location and the Saliency of“大[da] (big/large)/小[xiao] (small/little) ”,Journal of Ningxia University,vol.118, no.4, pp42-46, 2004. (in Chinese)