

A Study of the Indonesian Translation of '花 (Huā)' in Polysemous Words from a Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract

This study analyzes the polysemy phenomenon of the word "花 (Huā)" in Mandarin from a cognitive semantic perspective, as well as its translation strategies into Indonesian. This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. Data collection involved identifying and extracting all occurrences of "花" from the corpus. Analysis was guided by Rosch's Prototype Theory (1978), Fillmore's Frame Semantics (1982), and Lakoff & Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980). The research finds that the word "Huā" carries various meanings, ranging from its basic sense to metaphorical and metonymic interpretations, such as beauty, consumption, hypocrisy, and specific patterns. Cognitive semantics theory is employed to explain these meaning shifts through mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. Furthermore, translation strategies are adapted to context, taking into account cultural differences between Mandarin and Indonesian. The findings offer insights into cross-cultural translation practices and deepen the understanding of word meaning evolution within a cognitive framework.

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Introduction

Polysemy is a phenomenon in which a single word has multiple, yet related, meanings. In linguistics, polysemous words often pose significant challenges for translators, as their translations heavily depend on the context in which they are used. Polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon wherein a single lexical item conveys multiple, semantically related meanings. These meanings manifest across varying contexts, and accurate interpretation necessitates a thorough understanding of contextual nuances (Cruse 2002). The Mandarin word "花 (Huā)" is a perfect example of polysemy, as it can mean *flower*, *extravagance*, *beauty*, or *infidelity*, depending on the context.

Translating polysemous words is one of the most complex challenges in cross-linguistic translation practices. Polysemous words carry multiple meanings that are related yet distinct, depending on their usage in context. This complexity means that translating polysemous words requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of cultural, semantic, and cognitive aspects (Ying and Xu 2006). One fascinating example in Mandarin is the word “花 (Huā)”, which literally means “flower.” However, its meaning extends far beyond its biological description, encompassing figurative dimensions such as beauty, elegance, extravagance, infidelity, and even the essence of something precious.

The polysemy phenomenon in the word “花” illustrates how language serves not merely as a tool for communication, but also as a representation of human perception and cognition. In the tradition of cognitive linguistics, polysemy is understood as a form of meaning organization that reflects human patterns of thought. Eleanor Rosch's Prototype Theory (*Cognition and Categorization*, 1978) explains how word meanings can center on a core or prototypical sense, with other meanings developing through associative links. For example, the basic meaning of "flower" as a biological object serves as the prototype for “花,” while figurative meanings such as beauty or extravagance emerge through associations with the characteristics of flowers, such as aesthetics or fragility (Rosch and Lloyd 1978).

The Prototype Theory was first proposed by cognitive psychologist (Rosch 1973), who argued that categories of meaning are not always defined by absolute characteristics but rather by the most representative prototypical examples. In the context of the word “花 (Huā),” the prototype refers to the literal flower as a biological object that blooms and is aesthetically pleasing. However, this prototypical meaning can be extended to more abstract concepts such as beauty (the flower as a symbol of attractiveness), abundance (flowers flourishing as a symbol of prosperity), and infidelity (as in expressions like “花心,” which denotes a fickle or unfaithful heart).

Cognitive linguistics focuses on how word meanings are understood through the speaker's experiences and knowledge. Meaning is not solely determined by lexical definitions, but also shaped by social and cultural contexts. In his book *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Volume I. Theoretical Prerequisites*, Langacker asserts that word meanings are constructed through cognitive experiences and social interaction (Langacker 1987). In the context of translation, this cognitive understanding is essential for interpreting how the word "花 (huā)" may carry different meanings within Chinese culture, and how those meanings can be rendered appropriately into Indonesian.

Incorporating insights from cognitive construal theory, translations can be evaluated based on how translators make choices among multiple meanings of a polysemous word depending on its contextual nuances. This cognitive processing involved in interpreting '花' and determining its meaning in various contexts (such as beauty, femininity, or nature) emphasizes the interpretative frameworks that translators must navigate. Several studies highlight how metaphor translation and polysemy are influenced by cognitive perspectives. For instance, it has been shown that metaphor translation requires attention not only to linguistic markings but also to the cognitive maps that support the communicative intent and cultural resonance of the word (Rudhel 2020; Yi-qing and Wang 2021).

Research by Verspoor and Lowie emphasizes that the cognitive frameworks we employ significantly enhance our understanding of polysemous words. They argue that insights from cognitive linguistics and semantic networks can improve the strategies

used in deciphering polysemy, which aligns with the semantic complexities found in "花" (Verspoor and Lowie 2003). Furthermore, Crossley et al. highlight the importance of linguistic context, suggesting that the meaning of polysemous words like "花" is derived from the surrounding linguistic elements, which contribute to the nuances of its usage across different sentences (Crossley, Salsbury, and McNamara 2010). This notion is crucial as it underscores the interplay between lexical items and their meanings as perceived in distinct contexts.

Li and Slevc shed light on the gradient nature of semantic representations, positing that while polysemous meanings are interconnected, they exist along a continuum of relatedness (Li and Slevc 2016). This concept applies to "花," as its meanings are culturally and contextually embedded, thus impacting how it is understood and utilized in discourse. In contexts where "花" might refer to aesthetics in art or decoration, cognitive associations can complicate straightforward translations or interpretations.

Additionally, Charles Fillmore's Frame Semantics (*Frames, Fields, and Contrasts*, 1982) demonstrates that word meanings are understood through cognitive frames that involve relationships with other relevant concepts. In the case of "花," this frame may include visual elements (color, shape), cultural elements (flower symbolism in celebrations or rituals), and social elements (associations with beauty or adornment). These frames provide insight into how Mandarin speakers process the various meanings of the word across different contexts (Fillmore 1982).

Moreover, the investigation into children's understanding of polysemous words by Srinivasan and Snedeker illustrates that even young learners classify related meanings under common structures, revealing the cognitive processes that support the acquisition of words like "花" in multifaceted ways (Srinivasan and Snedeker 2013). This suggests that the meanings attached to "花" are not merely additive but rather interconnected in a cognitive framework that children naturally navigate as they develop their language skills.

Insights from Khalaf regarding translation difficulties align with the inherent complexities involved in transferring polysemous words across languages. As polysemous words can bear varying meanings in different cultures, they present unique challenges for learners and translators alike (Khalaf 2019). This complexity stresses the importance of context and cultural familiarity in accurately conveying meanings like that of "花" between languages.

Finally, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980) helps explain how the figurative meanings of "花" have evolved. In Mandarin, metaphors such as "青春之花" (the flower of youth) or "礼花" (celebratory flowers, referring to fireworks) illustrate how the concept of a flower is used to represent aesthetics, life, and festivity (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The complexities surrounding the translation of metaphors and polysemous words like '花' necessitate adopting an ecological translation perspective, which considers the interplay between language, culture, and social context. The translators' cognitive framework, informed by cultural understanding and contextual relevance, becomes essential in selecting the most appropriate meaning and form for translation. A study by Nguyen and Hien supports the notion that varying levels of metaphorical conventionality can impact translation strategies, emphasizing the role of translators' cognitive processing in handling polysemy effectively (Nguyen and Hien 2022).

Moreover, the conceptual metaphor theory offers a robust framework for understanding how words like '花' can convey different meanings across cultural boundaries. Translators must be adept at recognizing these meanings and employing strategies that not only translate the text but also transpose its cognitive and cultural implications (Al-Sowaidi, Mohammed, and Banda 2021; Jensen 2017). Effective metaphor translation often relies on the translator's ability to engage with and reconstruct the cognitive mappings that deliver the intended message across languages (Hanić, Pavlović, and Jahić 2016).

This study aims to explore how the word “花” is understood in Mandarin in terms of its polysemy and how it is translated into Indonesian with consideration for its contextual meanings. A cognitive semantic approach is used to address the following research questions:

1. How is the word “花 (Huā)” understood as a polysemous word in Mandarin, both literally and figuratively?
2. How do cognitive semantic theories—such as Prototype Theory, Frame Semantics, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory—help explain the variation in meanings of the word “花”?
3. How does the translation of “花” into Indonesian account for cultural, semantic, and polysemous differences?

By combining theoretical frameworks with empirical analysis, this research not only provides insights into the semantic relationship between Mandarin and Indonesian but also contributes to more accurate and culturally sensitive translation practices across languages.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design rooted in cognitive semantic theory to examine the polysemy of the Mandarin word “花 (Huā)” and its translation into Indonesian. The research aims to uncover how “花” is interpreted both literally and figuratively by native Mandarin speakers, and how translators transfer these meanings into Indonesian, taking into account the semantic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions.

Data collection involved identifying and extracting all occurrences of “花” from the corpus. Each token was analyzed contextually to determine its semantic value (literal, metaphorical, or metonymic), and its Indonesian equivalent was recorded. Translation samples were categorized and analyzed to reveal the strategies applied—such as lexical equivalence, modulation, paraphrase, and cultural substitution—in response to cognitive semantic cues.

Analysis was guided by Rosch's Prototype Theory (1978), Fillmore's Frame Semantics (1982), and Lakoff & Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980). These theoretical lenses allowed the researcher to identify prototypical and peripheral meanings, frame-structured semantic associations, and metaphorical extensions of “花”. The analysis compared source and target texts to evaluate whether the nuanced meanings embedded in Mandarin were effectively transferred into Indonesian, within appropriate cultural frames.

Results and Discussions

In the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (*Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*), the word “花” (huā, “flower”) encompasses a wide range of meanings, extending from natural phenomena to abstract concepts within human society (Shuxiang 2009). This semantic diversity reflects the complexity of human cognition and presents distinct challenges in cross-linguistic translation. This article analyzes the meanings of “花” from a cognitive linguistic perspective and examines its translation into Indonesian.

Literal Meanings of "花 (huā)"

Reproductive Organ in Seed Plants

The core meaning of “花” is the reproductive organ of seed-bearing plants, which is translated into Indonesian as “bunga” or “kembang.” Both terms reflect the biological function of the flower as a reproductive organ, indicating a semantic equivalence between the two languages at the basic level.

Ornamental Plants

In this context, “花 (huā)” refers to ornamental plants such as roses or peonies. In Indonesian, terms like bunga mawar or kembang sepatu are used to describe these plants. These expressions not only highlight the aesthetic appeal of flowers but also reflect Indonesian cultural appreciation for flora.

Objects Resembling Flowers

“花 (huā)” is also used metaphorically to describe objects that resemble the form of a flower, such as snowflakes or sea foam. In Indonesian, similar concepts are expressed through more specific terms without directly referencing “flowers,” illustrating different linguistic approaches to visual imagery.

Social and Cultural Meanings of "花 (huā)"

Fireworks

In this usage, “花 (huā)” refers to fireworks, which are also called “kembang api” in Indonesian. This translation combines the visual element of the flower with the explosive nature of fireworks, forming a culturally coherent expression.

Decorative Patterns or Motifs

In the arts and crafts domain, “花 (huā)” is frequently used to describe decorative patterns. In Indonesian, terms such as motif or desain are commonly used, though they do not always include the word “flower.”

Flower-Adorned Objects

The term also refers to objects adorned with flower patterns, such as flower vases or floral curtains. In Indonesian, the word “bunga” is often explicitly included in such descriptions, reflecting conceptual similarity between the languages.

Abstract and Figurative Meanings of "花 (huā)"

Mixture of Colors or Diverse Patterns

"花 (huā)" can denote multicolored or patterned designs, such as in clothing. In Indonesian, this idea is usually translated with terms like bermotif or berwarna-warni, without referencing flowers directly.

Blurred Vision

In this sense, "花 (huā)" describes blurred vision, as in the phrase "眼花" (blurred eyes). The Indonesian equivalent uses expressions such as kabur or buram, omitting any floral reference.

Illusion or Deception

The term also conveys something deceptive or illusory, as in "花招" (trick or ruse). In Indonesian, this concept is rendered as tipu daya or akal bulus, which maintain the intended meaning without invoking "flowers."

Metaphor for Beautiful Women

Metaphorically, "花 (huā)" often refers to beautiful young women, as seen in "花季少女" (a girl in the bloom of youth). In Indonesian, this is typically translated as gadis cantik or perempuan muda yang cantik, preserving the poetic nuance while omitting explicit floral imagery.

Historical Reference to Prostitution

Historically, "花 (huā)" has been used in reference to prostitution, as in "花魁" (courtesan). In Indonesian, this is translated as pelacuran or prostitusi, although such usage is rare in modern Mandarin.

Wounds or Scars

In some contexts, "花 (huā)" refers to injuries or scars from battles or physical altercations. In Indonesian, this meaning is conveyed through terms like bekas luka or luka akibat pertempuran.

Metaphor for Essence or Quintessence

"花 (huā)" can also metaphorically signify the core or essence of something, as in "精华之花" (the flower of essence). This is typically translated into Indonesian as inti or esensi, preserving the metaphorical intent without direct floral reference.

(Xiaoli 2016) The wide range of meanings associated with "花 (huā)" in Mandarin reflects the intricate interplay between language, culture, and human cognition. In Indonesian, translating these various meanings requires not only linguistic proficiency but also strategic flexibility and a deep understanding of cultural and cognitive differences. This analysis underscores the importance of cross-cultural and linguistic awareness in translation practices to ensure semantic accuracy, contextual relevance, and stylistic elegance.

Literal Translation

The word “花 (huā)” is often used in a literal context to refer to a physical flower. For example:

Mandarin: 花开了 (Huā kāi le)

Literal translation: “The flower has bloomed.”

In this case, the translation of “花 (huā)” is straightforward, as the concept of a flower in its biological sense is present and culturally recognized in both Mandarin and Indonesian.

Figurative Translation

In figurative contexts, “花 (huā)” can represent abstract notions such as beauty or abundance. Consider the following example:

Mandarin: 她像花一样美丽 (Tā xiàng huā yǐyàng měilì)

Indonesian literal translation: “Dia cantik seperti bunga.”

In this instance, the literal translation remains appropriate, as the metaphor of a flower symbolizing beauty also exists in Indonesian, where flowers are culturally associated with aesthetic appeal and femininity.

Idiomatic Translation

At the idiomatic level, the meaning of “花 (huā)” becomes more complex and context-dependent. For example:

Mandarin: 花钱 (Huā qián)

Literal translation: “Spend money.”

Indonesian equivalent: “Menghabiskan uang.”

Here, the idiom “花钱” has a direct and culturally equivalent counterpart in Indonesian, allowing for a relatively easy translation.

However, the idiom “花心 (huā xīn)” requires a more nuanced and adaptive translation approach:

Mandarin: 他很花心 (Tā hěn huā xīn)

Literal translation: “He has a flower heart.”

Indonesian equivalent: “Dia tidak setia” or “Dia playboy.”

In this case, a literal translation is ineffective. The translator must interpret the figurative meaning behind the idiom to convey the culturally appropriate message in Indonesian. This highlights the necessity of semantic and cultural sensitivity when dealing with idiomatic expressions.

Cognitive Approaches in Translation

Understanding how translators manage meaning variation arising from polysemy in different contexts is crucial in ensuring accuracy and cultural appropriateness. Cognitive linguistic theories—namely Prototype Theory, Frame Semantics, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory—provide a valuable framework for analyzing and translating polysemous words like “花 (huā)” in Mandarin into Indonesian.

Prototype Theory in Translation

In translating polysemous words such as “花 (Huā)”, Prototype Theory offers a foundation for understanding how native Mandarin speakers cognitively identify the

prototypical or most central meaning—namely, “flower” in its literal sense. This meaning serves as the conceptual starting point from which other, more figurative interpretations emerge.

For instance, the literal translation of “花 (huā)” as “bunga” in a sentence like “花开了” (The flower has bloomed) generally requires no further interpretation. However, when the word appears in figurative or idiomatic contexts, translators must move beyond the prototype to grasp derived meanings. In the idiom “花心” (literally “flower heart”), the term metaphorically denotes unfaithfulness. Since “hati bunga” carries no semantic meaning in Indonesian, the translator must shift from the prototypical image of a flower to a culturally appropriate equivalent such as “playboy” or “not faithful.”

Prototype Theory, therefore, helps explain how polysemous meanings extend from a central prototype to more abstract interpretations. The translator’s task is to recognize when the meaning shifts from the core to the periphery and to adjust the target language rendering accordingly.

Frame Semantics in Translation

Frame Semantics posits that word meanings are understood within broader conceptual frames that shape interpretation. In this approach, “花 (huā)” is processed within context-dependent frames that guide translators in determining its intended meaning.

For example, in an economic frame, the expression “花钱” (to spend money) no longer refers to a physical flower but to the act of financial expenditure. Recognizing this frame allows the translator to discard the literal interpretation and instead convey the idiomatic meaning in Indonesian as “menghabiskan uang.”

In romantic or aesthetic frames, such as in “她像花一样美丽” (She is as beautiful as a flower), the cultural association between flowers and beauty is shared across Mandarin and Indonesian. Thus, the translation “Dia cantik seperti bunga” functions effectively, as the metaphor operates similarly within both cultural frames.

Frame Semantics also aids in interpreting more nuanced idiomatic meanings. For instance, “花心”, in the romantic relationship frame, implies emotional inconstancy or infidelity. Recognizing this frame helps the translator find an equivalent idiomatic expression in Indonesian, such as “playboy” or “unfaithful heart”, depending on the tone and context.

Conceptual Metaphor in Translation

Conceptual Metaphor Theory is particularly useful in understanding how “花 (huā)” functions in figurative contexts. According to this theory, abstract concepts are often expressed through metaphors grounded in physical or experiential domains.

In “花心”, for example, unfaithfulness is metaphorically represented through the image of a blooming flower—symbolizing instability or constant change. A translator aware of this conceptual metaphor will recognize that a literal rendering such as “flower heart” would be ineffective in Indonesian, and instead opt for a culturally intelligible idiom like “playboy.”

In other contexts, flowers symbolize life, prosperity, or happiness. Expressions such as “the flower of life” or “flower of happiness” rely on metaphorical associations that require careful consideration during translation. The translator must grasp the figurative intent and identify appropriate equivalents in Indonesian that preserve the emotional and cognitive impact. Conceptual Metaphor Theory thus reveals how abstract meanings

are cognitively structured in the minds of language users and guides translators in capturing these dynamics in the target language.

By applying these cognitive frameworks, translators can better navigate the semantic complexity of polysemous words, ensuring that both literal and figurative meanings are preserved in culturally appropriate and semantically coherent ways.

Translation Strategies for “花 (huā)”

In addressing the challenges of translating the polysemous Mandarin word “花 (huā)”, translators may employ a range of strategies to capture the complex meanings associated with the term. These strategies aim to ensure that both literal and figurative dimensions are conveyed accurately and appropriately within the cultural and linguistic norms of the target language.

For prototypical or literal meanings, the translator can apply a direct translation of “花 (huā)” as “bunga” (flower). This approach is most effective in biological contexts, such as in the sentence “花开了” (The flower has bloomed). The strategy functions well when the literal sense of the word aligns consistently between the source and target languages.

When “花 (huā)” is used idiomatically, the translator must seek an idiomatic equivalent in Indonesian. For example, the idiom “花钱” (to spend money) can be directly translated as “menghabiskan uang”, as it has a clear and culturally equivalent expression in Indonesian. However, for idioms such as “花心” (literally “flower heart”), a more culturally nuanced and idiomatic rendering is required. In this case, literal translation would fail to convey the intended meaning. Instead, expressions like “playboy” or “not faithful” are more effective in capturing the connotation of emotional inconstancy in the target language.

In figurative contexts—such as when “花 (huā)” symbolizes beauty or prosperity—the translator must first interpret the symbolic function of the term within the source culture and then assess whether a comparable symbol exists in the target culture. For instance, the sentence “她像花一样美丽” (She is as beautiful as a flower) can be translated directly into Indonesian as “Dia cantik seperti bunga,” because the association between flowers and beauty is also culturally present in Indonesian.

Cultural Adaptation as when neither literal nor idiomatic translation is feasible, cultural adaptation may be necessary. Certain metaphors or idioms containing “花 (huā)” in Mandarin may lack direct counterparts in Indonesian. In such cases, the translator must find expressions that convey the intended cultural meaning, even if the lexical items differ. This approach ensures that the translation remains meaningful and culturally appropriate, even when literal equivalence is unattainable.

This analysis demonstrates that translating polysemous words such as “花 (huā)” requires a deep understanding of the cognitive and cultural contexts in which the term is used. Cognitive semantics—particularly Prototype Theory, Frame Semantics, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory—provides a valuable framework for understanding how polysemous meanings are mentally processed by speakers, and how translators can accurately capture these meanings in the target language.

The word “花 (huā)” exemplifies the dynamic interaction between literal and figurative meanings, requiring translators to constantly navigate between these layers to produce translations that are both accurate and contextually appropriate. This challenge extends beyond the translation of individual words; it involves recognizing the

underlying conceptual frames and metaphorical expressions in both the source and target languages. A cognitively informed translation approach is therefore essential to preserving the semantic richness and cultural nuance of such terms.

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed how the Mandarin word “花 (huā)” is translated into Indonesian through a cognitive semantic approach. By applying Prototype Theory, Frame Semantics, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how polysemous meanings are mapped in the minds of language users, and how translators can navigate the complexity of such meanings in cross-linguistic contexts.

Translating polysemous words requires careful attention to context and to the broader conceptual meanings underlying each expression. Translators must grasp both the literal and figurative senses of the word, as well as how these meanings are shaped by cultural norms and speakers' cognitive experiences. With an appropriate cognitive approach, the challenges of translating polysemous terms like “花 (huā)” can be effectively managed, allowing for accurate and contextually appropriate communication of meaning in the target language.

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