

Semantic Field Construction and Metaphorical Patterning in Classical Chinese Poetry: Evidence from Tang Dynasty Female Poets

Pei-Yi Hsiao¹ and Hsin-Yu Lin²

National Chi Nan University

¹pyhsiao@ncnu.edu.tw, ²sandy39442010@gmail.com

Corpus-based approaches have increasingly contributed to the investigation of semantic structure and metaphorical patterning in language. However, the extent to which recurrent lexical distributions can reveal systematic conceptual organization in Classical Chinese poetry remains underexplored (e.g., Liu et al., 2015). While previous studies of Tang poetry have primarily relied on qualitative literary interpretation (e.g., Su, 2007; Shen, 2008; Liao, 2013; among others), relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between lexical distribution, semantic field construction, and metaphorical organization. This study addresses this issue by examining whether corpus-derived collocational patterns can provide linguistic evidence for semantic structuring and metaphorical mapping in Tang poetic language. More specifically, the study explores whether corpus-derived distributional patterns can serve as empirical evidence for semantic organization in literary language.

Specifically, the study investigates three research questions: (1) To what extent can recurrent collocational patterns reveal semantic field structure in Classical Chinese poetry? (2) How are metaphorical mappings reflected in corpus-derived lexical distributions? (3) What corpus-based evidence can be identified for systematic variation in semantic organization and metaphorical patterning within Classical Chinese poetry?

Methodologically, the study adopts a corpus-based approach. Two curated corpora were constructed, consisting of 32 poems by Shangguan Wan'er and 16 poems by Li Ye. Due to the linguistic characteristics of Classical Chinese, including the absence of explicit word boundaries and flexible word classes, all texts were manually segmented before analysis. The corpora were analyzed using AntConc 4.3.1 (Anthony, 2024) to generate word frequency lists, keyword distributions, and collocational patterns. The analysis focuses on high-frequency content words associated with major imagery domains, including celestial phenomena, landscape, flora, and emotion-related expressions. Drawing on principles of distributional semantics (Harris, 1954; Firth, 1957; Miller & Charles, 1991), the study examines how recurrent lexical associations contribute to semantic field formation. These patterns are subsequently interpreted within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989) to identify systematic mappings between source and target domains. Although the corpus size is relatively small, the analysis emphasizes recurring tendencies and distributional patterns rather than absolute frequencies. More broadly, the study explores how computational corpus methods can support the identification of semantic and metaphorical structures in premodern literary texts.

The results reveal systematic differences in semantic organization between the two corpora. While both poets make extensive use of nature-related imagery, their lexical distributions and collocational structures differ considerably. Shangguan Wan'er's poems display a higher concentration of flora- and landscape-related lexical items, which frequently co-occur with expressions of movement, elevation, and agency. These recurring associations

form semantic fields structured around spatial orientation and environmental interaction, suggesting metaphorical mappings associated with elevation, social positioning, and personal development. In contrast, Li Ye's corpus exhibits a higher concentration of emotion-related lexical items and affective expressions. Their collocational patterns cluster around interpersonal relationships, longing, separation, and emotional experience, producing semantic fields centered on subjective and relational meanings.

The examples provided below are representative of recurring collocational patterns identified across the corpora rather than isolated instances.

(1) **Dēngshān yī cháng wàng**, (登山一長望，)

‘Climbing a mountain and gazing into the distance,’

zhèng yù jiǔ chūn chū. (正遇九春初。)

‘I arrived at the beginning of spring.’

(Cited from *Twenty-Five Poems on Visiting Princess Changning's Floating Cup Pool* (No. 9))

(2) **Wàng shuǐ shì dēngshān**, **shān gāo hú yòu kuò**. (望水試登山，山高湖又闊。)

‘I try to climb the mountain to see the water, but the mountain is high and the lake is wide.’

Xiāngsī wú xiǎo xī, xiāng wàng jīng nián yuè. (相思無曉夕，相望經年月。)

‘My longing knows no day or night; I gaze at you year after year.’

(Cited from *Sending to Zhu Fang*)

Example (1) illustrates the association between landscape imagery and upward spatial orientation, whereas Example (2) highlights the clustering of emotion-related expressions around interpersonal longing and separation.

Further analysis of key imagery words such as moon reveals distinct metaphorical functions across the two corpora. In Shangguan Wan'er's poems, the lexical item tends to participate in collocational networks associated with temporal progression and evaluative states, suggesting mappings between cyclical natural phenomena and biographical development. In Li Ye's corpus, similar imagery more frequently occurs alongside emotion-related expressions, reinforcing its role in affective meaning construction. These findings suggest that metaphorical meaning emerges not merely from individual poetic expressions but from recurrent lexical and collocational structures distributed throughout the corpus.

By integrating corpus linguistics, distributional semantics, and conceptual metaphor theory, this study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the relationship between linguistic patterning and conceptual structure. More broadly, it demonstrates how data-driven computational methods can provide empirical evidence for theoretical questions about semantic organization and metaphorical representation, thereby illustrating the continuing relevance of linguistic theory in the age of AI.

Selected references:

- Lakoff, G., and M. Turner. 1989. *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Liu, Chao-Lin, et al. 2015. Textual analysis of complete Tang poems for discoveries and applications—style, antitheses, social networks, and couplets. *Proceedings of the 2015 Conference on Computational Linguistics and Speech Processing (ROCLING 2015)*, 43-57.