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Metaphors Embedded in Chinese Characters Bridge Dissimilar Concepts

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Abstract

How related is skin to a quilt or door to worry? Here, we show that linguistic experience strongly informs people's judgments of such word pairs. We asked Chinese-speakers, English-speakers, and Chinese-English bilinguals to rate semantic and visual similarity between pairs of Chinese words and of their English translation equivalents. Some pairs were unrelated, others were also unrelated but shared a radical (e.g., "expert" and "dolphin" share the radical meaning "pig"), others also shared a radical which invokes a metaphorical relationship. For example, a quilt covers the body like skin; understand, with a sun radical, invokes understanding as illumination. Importantly, the shared radicals are not part of the pronounced word form. Chinese speakers rated word pairs with metaphorical connections as more similar than other pairs. English speakers did not even though they were sensitive to shared radicals. Chinese-English bilinguals showed sensitivity to the metaphorical connections even when tested with English words.