

Semantic Salience of Dialectal Expressions in Chinese Modern Classical Local Novels from the Perspective of Embodied Cognitive Linguistics

¹Ling Chun Hua, ²Tan Tiam Lai

¹Faculty Of Languages And Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia, ²Faculty Of Languages And Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

Email: tiamlai@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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Abstract

Chinese modern classical local novels, imbued with rich cultural empathy and unmistakable geographical distinctiveness, craft a linguistic tapestry that reflects the nation's aesthetic ethos. Dialectal lexicon, functioning as both a vessel of indigenous tradition and a medium of lived experience, proves instrumental in shaping characters, articulating emotion, and driving narrative momentum. Yet scholarly attention has largely prioritized dialect's stylistic attributes and symbolic cultural value, leaving two critical gaps: a methodical examination of how dialect achieves semantic salience within textual structures, and a lack of in-depth discussion on the embodied cognitive co-construction path between the writer and reader. This paper introduces salience theory in embodied cognitive linguistics, constructs an analytical framework of "writer's embodied cognition-language salience-reader's embodied cognition", and selects five Chinese modern classical local novels, including Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li's *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian'ai's *Water Burial*, as the primary texts, and systematically investigates the semantic salience mechanism and embodied cognition function of three categories of dialect words: object, person, and action. Starting from the three dimensions of language form, contextual embedding, and cultural schema, this study reveals how writers use dialect words to achieve semantic foregrounding, and how readers engage in semantic processing and emotional resonance through experiential activation. It is found that dialect words assume the functions of social identity coding, action portrayal, and cultural image construction in novels, respectively, showing a three-in-one salience mechanism of "language structure--narrative strategy--embodied cognitive acceptance." This study innovatively applies salience theory to literature, illuminating the embodied cognitive path of literary language and advancing linguistic-literary interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: Embodied Cognitive Linguistics, Salience Theory, Chinese Modern Classical Local Novels, Dialectal Vocabulary, Semantic Salience

Introduction

Research Background

As an important literary form carrying national experience and regional culture, Chinese modern classical local novels show a very local texture in works such as Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li's *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian'ai's *Water Burial*. As a linguistic symbol of regional culture, dialect vocabulary not only enhances the realism and national identity of the text, but also plays a unique role in character construction, emotional expression, and narrative development. Taking the Xiangxi dialect in *Border Town*, the Northeast dialect in *The Field of Life and Death*, the Jinnan dialect in *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, the Jizhong dialect in *Lotus Lake*, and the Guizhou dialect in *Water Burial* as examples, dialect vocabulary, as a composite of embodied experience and social cognition, realizes functional expression beyond decorative language in literary texts.

However, most of the existing studies focus on the stylistic shaping and cultural symbolism of dialects, and rarely explore how semantic salience is achieved in texts. There is also a lack of systematic investigation into the embodied cognitive co-construction mechanism between the writer's embodied cognition and the reader's embodied cognition. It is difficult for the traditional view of language to explain why dialects become the focus of narratives in specific contexts, and to reveal how readers can achieve a deep embodied cognition of characters' psychology, social relations, and cultural situations through dialects.

In the context of globalization and media, regional writing is facing the risk of gradual marginalization, and dialects, as important carriers of local experiences and cultural memories, carry the unique value of resisting cultural homogenization and preserving linguistic diversity. Especially in Chinese modern classical local novels, dialects are not only a rhetorical resource, but also a key node that reflects the vitality and aesthetic creativity of national languages. Therefore, a systematic analysis of the semantic mechanisms of dialect vocabularies in Chinese modern classical local novels not only helps deepen our embodied cognition of Chinese narrative traditions but also provides empirical support for the localization development of Chinese pragmatic mechanisms and cognitive linguistic theories.

In the current context of Chinese language education, literary research, and language and cultural dissemination, increasingly emphasizing 'locality' and 'embodiment,' this study is expected to provide a new cognitive dimension for the interpretation of traditional literary texts, the construction of cross-cultural reading, and literary language teaching, holding important academic value and practical significance.

The salience theory in embodied cognitive linguistics provides a new cognitive approach to solve this problem. This theory emphasizes that language units gain attention in communication because of their perceptual priority, contextual embeddedness, and cultural activation, which are dynamic, situational, and interactive. Combined with the trinity path of "writer's embodied cognition-language salience-reader's embodied cognition", this paper attempts to systematically reveal how dialect words in Chinese modern classical local novels achieve semantic salience by taking object-image, person-pronoun, and action-related dialect words as the starting point, and establish an embodied cognitive chain of emotional

resonance and meaning synergy between writers' language choices and readers' cognitive reception.

Research Significance

This study uses the salience theory of embodied cognitive linguistics as a theoretical fulcrum, and based on the three-in-one cognitive path of "writer's embodied cognition-language salience-reader's embodied cognition", systematically explores the semantic salience mechanism of dialect vocabulary in Chinese modern classical local novels. This research has the following values:

Firstly, this study expands the cognitive dimensions of dialect semantic research to provide new theoretical pathways for literary language researchers. The paper moves beyond traditional views of dialect regionality and style, and analyzes how dialect vocabulary gains semantic salience through language forms, cultural ties, and situational activation from the perspective of embodied cognition and contextual interaction. The theoretical approach deepens the mechanistic understanding of "locality" and "cultural perception" in literary language, encouraging the structuring and systematization of literary language research.

Secondly, this study enriches the application of the salience theory in narrative discourse, and provides empirical evidence for the landing of linguistic theory in literary texts. Through an in-depth analysis of three types of dialect words: those related to objects, personal pronouns, and actions, this study demonstrates the cognitive process of the salience mechanisms in literary narrative from semantic construction to emotional arousal, and verifies the explanatory power of embodied cognitive linguistics theory in understanding complex discourse. This achievement not only fills the gap in the insufficient application of salience theory in the study of literary language but also provides a transferable analytical model for linguists.

Thirdly, this study constructs a "writer-language-reader" embodied cognition chain to provide an embodied cognitive model for the study of text reading and reception. This paper systematically presents the process of dialect vocabulary highlighting in narrative contexts, revealing how writers use cultural memory and bodily experiences to complete language foregrounding expression, and how readers reconstruct semantic processing and aesthetic resonance based on experiential schemas and situational reconstruction. This embodied cognitive chain not only deepens the understanding of the mechanisms behind writers' language choices but also provides theoretical support for research on text reception, aesthetic cognition, and so on.

Fourthly, this study promotes the interdisciplinary integration of linguistics with modern literature and educational communication, providing theoretical guidance for teaching and communication practices. The study uses the classic rural novels of representative authors such as Shen Congwen, Xiao Hong, Zhao Shuli, and Sun Li as corpus, taking into account the depth of language theory and the complexity of textual reality, and proposes a theoretical model with explanatory power and practical value. The research results can not only provide strategic support for literary language understanding and discourse teaching in secondary school Chinese language education, but also offer theoretical references for how Chinese

local culture can achieve meaning co-construction through language strategies in cross-cultural communication.

Research Objectives

This study takes the salience theory of embodied cognitive linguistics as the core framework, aiming to reveal the semantic salience mechanism of dialect vocabulary in Chinese modern classical local novels and its operating logic in the embodied cognitive chain of “writer’s embodied cognition--language salience--reader’s embodied cognition”. Specific goals include:

Integrate the elements of salience theory such as perceptual salience, cultural embeddedness and contextual dependence to establish a “three-dimensional semantic salience model” suitable for literary texts to guide subsequent dialect empirical analysis.

Focusing on the three types of dialect words in Shen Congwen’s *Border Town*, Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli’s *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li’s *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian’ai’s *Water Burial*, this study analyzes their salient performance, embodied cognitive function and narrative value in the text.

From a two-way embodied cognitive perspective, this paper analyzes how writers use dialects to manipulate meaning and project emotions, and how readers use embodied experience and cultural schemata to complete meaning construction and aesthetic experience.

Through empirical analysis, the applicability and explanatory power of salience theory in literary language research are verified, providing a textual basis and theoretical support for the expansion of interdisciplinary applications of embodied cognitive linguistics.

Literature Review

“Salience”, as an important concept in embodied cognitive linguistics, emphasizes that language units gain the focus of attention in the process of communication and embodied cognition due to their formal characteristics, contextual adaptability and cultural embeddedness, and thus become the embodied cognitive core of semantic generation and emotional resonance. In literary discourse, the salience mechanism is not only reflected in the writer’s language selection strategy in narrative, but also has a profound impact on the reader’s understanding and construction of character emotions, social context, and cultural imagery in the process of acceptance. In recent years, salience theory has gradually become an important bridge connecting language, cognition, and literature. Its application in literary language research has continued to expand, providing theoretical support for exploring the constructed relationship between language form and narrative meaning.

Existing studies have conducted multi-dimensional discussions around salience theory and provided a solid theoretical foundation for this study. Wang Juli (2004) and Zhang Meng (2021) approached the topic from the perspectives of language style and foregrounding, respectively, and pointed out that writers highlight their subjective emotions and character images by adjusting cognitive reference points and perceptual focus, which provides direction for this study to analyze how writers in rural novels use dialects to activate specific social roles

and emotions. Starting from grammatical structure and sentence arrangement, Liu Dongdong (2010), Li Wenhao (2011), and He Xinxin (2018) systematically revealed how embodied cognitive salience achieves information salience through formal means such as word order and syntactic focus, providing detailed tools for analyzing how dialect words achieve syntactic focus in context.

Research on the salience mechanism from a cultural perspective has also continued to deepen. Zhou Xiaoling and Zhang Jing (2011), and Zhu Xuelian (2022) emphasized the profound constraints of cultural context on metaphor understanding and salience processes, suggesting that when interpreting local dialects in texts such as *Border Town* and *Lotus Lake*, we should pay attention to the regional cultural prototypes and emotional contexts on which they rely. Niu Mengying (2012) pointed out through the study of the salience mechanism of English and Chinese compound words that the particularity of language units in word formation often assumes the dual expressive function of emotion and cultural imagery, which has important implications for analyzing the symbolic function of dialects in novel narratives.

In terms of the salience mechanism of folk language forms, Xia Riguang and Li Linyu's (2012) summary of the diversity of idiom imagery provides a theoretical basis for exploring the expressiveness and narrative driving force of folk proverbs and idioms in *The Field of Life and Death* and *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*. Li Wenhao and Qi Huiyang (2012), and Ma Chenting (2014) started from the perspective of rhetorical metonymy, revealing how the salience mechanism activates readers' emotional associations through the foregrounding of language units, which is particularly critical when analyzing figurative dialects such as "running like a hundred ants" and "twisting the mouth and making eyes" in *Water Burial*.

From the perspective of cross-cultural and emotional communication, Liu Routing (2017) and Jiang Zhiyang (2020) pointed out that the salience effect of literary language often reproduces semantics through emotional images and cultural symbols in cross-language communication, which provides an important theoretical fulcrum for the discussion of dialects as a medium of cultural embodied cognition in Chinese modern classical local novels. Li Guidong's (2020) analysis of salience strategies in topic structure and viewpoint guidance inspires us to pay attention to how the dynamic setting of embodied cognitive focus in narrative discourse guides readers' understanding and evaluation of characters' fate. Li Lei (2023) further argues the importance of syntactic structure selection in semantic focus and emotional communication, starting from the grammatical salience function of the "ba" sentence, providing a mechanistic reference for analyzing syntactic and dialectal expressions in Chinese modern classical local novels.

Although the above studies have expanded the applicability of the salience theory in terms of language structure, rhetorical devices, and cultural dimensions, there are also shortcomings. Most studies focus on standard language or Western language materials and lack systematic analysis of the salience mechanism of Chinese dialects in literary narratives; the research focuses more on "writer's language operation" and neglects "reader's acceptance and recognition", ignoring the embodied cognitive construction process of the salience mechanism at the receiving end; research often stays at the level of local language units, lacking systematic linkage analysis of macro-level aspects such as character images, narrative structures, and thematic expressions.

In response to the above shortcomings, this article will use the salience theory in embodied cognitive linguistics as the core framework, focusing on the interaction mechanism between writer's embodied cognition and reader's embodied cognition. Five Chinese modern classical local novels, including Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li's *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian'ai's *Water Burial*, will be selected as language materials to conduct a systematic study around object, person, and action dialect words.

Research Questions and Methods

This study is based on embodied cognitive linguistics, especially its core mechanism, "Salience Theory". It systematically explores the semantic salience mechanism of dialect vocabulary in the narrative context of Chinese modern classical rural novels, as well as the two-way embodied cognitive construction path of "writer's embodied cognition-language salience-reader's embodied cognition". To this end, this paper focuses on the following research questions:

How do dialect words achieve semantic salience in texts? What language forms and narrative functions are reflected in their salience mechanism?

How do writers choose and use dialect words based on their own embodied cognitive experiences? What kinds of emotional intentions and social observations do their language-salience strategies reflect?

How can readers recognize the semantic orientation of dialect words in the process of reception? How do their perception paths and emotional resonance participate in the generation and reconstruction of meaning?

In order to systematically respond to the above research questions, this paper will comprehensively adopt the following research methods:

Five Chinese modern classical local novels, including Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li's *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian'ai's *Water Burial*, will be selected as language materials, focusing on three major categories of dialect words: object, person, and action. The text analysis method is adopted to systematically extract and classify the corpus, and the analysis dimensions and salience types are established.

Based on the salience theory in embodied cognitive linguistics, combined with the three-layer mechanism of "formal salience-contextual salience-cultural salience", this paper deeply analyzes the foregrounding mode, perceptual priority effect, and semantic salience structure of dialect words in narrative discourse.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the author's life, creative background, and literature on language preference, this paper explores their embodied cognitive choice path in the construction of novel language and reveals how dialect words carry the writer's cultural stance and emotional expression.

Using schema theory and the emotional resonance mechanism in embodied cognitive linguistics, this study explores how readers activate embodied cognitive images, complete semantic processing and emotional experiences through life experiences in the process of

acceptance, and generate an understanding of narrative focus and an aesthetic response to characters' fate based on this.

Theoretical Framework

Core Concepts of Embodied Cognitive Linguistics

Embodied Cognitive Linguistics (ECL) is developed based on the theory of cognitive linguistics and was proposed by Wang Yin (2014, 2020) in the context of Chinese language and culture. Its core principle "embodiment–cognition–language" reveals that the formation and use of language are deeply rooted in human physical experience and cognitive processing. Embodied Cognitive Linguistics emphasizes that experience is the basis of cognition, cognition is the sublimation of experience, and language is the organic combination of the two (Wang Yin, 2014, 61, 63). The innovation of this theory lies in its dynamism and practicality, especially in providing a new perspective on explaining the interaction between language, bodily experience, and cultural context. Embodied Cognitive Linguistics not only focuses on how language expresses individual cognition and emotions, but also on how language constructs meaning through cultural adaptation and social practice. Through the dialectical relationship of "embodiment–cognition–language," Embodied Cognitive Linguistics has constructed a unique analytical framework, providing a theoretical basis for language and literary research.

The Combination of Salience Theory in Cognitive Linguistics and Literary Analysis

Embodied Cognitive Linguistics emphasizes that language is not an isolated symbol system, but a tool for constructing meaning that is deeply rooted in human embodied experience, perceptual activities, and cultural cognition. In this theoretical system, salience theory is one of the core mechanisms, focusing on how language units gain attention in specific contexts due to their perceptual salience, cognitive priority, and cultural fit, thus becoming a key entry point for embodied cognitive processing in communication and narrative.

Salience is not an inherent attribute of language form itself, but a dynamically generated perceptual focus driven by context, communicative purpose, and cognitive experience. In literary discourse, this mechanism is particularly complex. Based on individual experience, cultural memory, and aesthetic tendency, writers use language selection to foreground specific concepts, emotions, or value images; in the process of reception, readers mobilize their life experience and emotional schema, carry out semantic processing and psychological projection on salient information, and complete the resonant reconstruction of narrative meaning and characters' emotions.

Based on this theory, this paper proposes an analytical path of "writer's embodied cognition--language salience--reader's embodied cognition". Writers use salient language choices to construct cognitive focus in their creations, guiding the flow of discourse information and value expression; readers, based on their existing social experience, cultural background, and pragmatic knowledge, perceive and activate these language forms and respond emotionally, thus forming a closed loop at the receiving end of meaning construction.

In Chinese modern classical local novels, dialect words, with their high degree of embodiment, regionalism, and emotional appeal, constitute an ideal observation point for the semantic salience mechanism. Whether it is the Xiangxi appellation words with ethical

warmth in *Border Town*, the Northeastern action dialects that carry emotional outbursts in *The Field of Life and Death*, or the dialect expressions showing social identity, psychological tension, and cultural psychology in *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, *Lotus Lake*, and *Water Burial*, these language units all achieve semantic focus in the narrative with their unique embodied cognitive significance, becoming key language materials that reflect the role of salience mechanisms.

At the level of writers' embodied cognition, the choice of these dialects reflects the dual integration of language form and cultural schema, which is an aesthetic exercise in which writers convey social structure, character emotions, and value positions through language form. At the level of readers' embodied cognition, dialect words activate their social roles, behavioral scripts, and emotional connections in their daily experience, completing the experiential transformation from language input to meaning generation. Thus, the salience mechanism not only connects language form and meaning content, but also constructs a cognitive-emotional co-construction channel between writer, language, and reader.

Research on the Semantic Salience Mechanism of Dialect Vocabulary from the Perspective of Embodied Cognitive Linguistics

In Chinese modern classical local novels, dialects are not only widely used as linguistic symbols of regional culture, but also play rich aesthetic and narrative functions in the text. How to explain the mechanism by which these localized language forms stand out in the text, and reveal their inherent rules in constructing character images, creating narrative atmosphere, and arousing readers' resonance, is the core issue of this article.

Embodied cognitive linguistics emphasizes the close relationship between language and human embodied cognition, emotional experience, and cultural background. The generation of language meaning depends not only on grammatical structure, but also on the speaker's expressive intention and the recipient's perception path. As an important branch of embodied cognitive linguistics, salience theory focuses on how language forms gain attention and embodied cognitive reinforcement in specific contexts, revealing their dynamic process from background to foreground and from commonplace to salience. This theory provides deep cognitive support for understanding the form selection and meaning generation in literary language.

Specifically speaking of the literary use of dialect vocabulary, the salience mechanism is manifested in how writers select dialect forms with local characteristics and cultural emotions from various expressions, so as to activate readers' physical perception and emotional memory in the narrative, thereby forming an aesthetic focus with cultural arousal. At the same time, readers also use existing schemas to reprocess and highlight the meaning of dialect words in the process of interpretation, transforming them into individualized embodied cognitive images and emotional experiences. Therefore, the semantic salience of dialects is the result of interactive construction under the dual effects of the writer's choice and the reader's cognition, reflecting the deep connection between language form, cognitive experience, and cultural psychology.

This section intends to use three types of dialect vocabulary, namely "object type, person type, and action type", as analytical dimensions to systematically explore their semantic

salience paths and literary functions in the narrative context. From the perspective of the salience theory in embodied cognitive linguistics, the semantic salience of dialect vocabulary is not only reflected in the writer's conscious activation of perceptual advantages, cultural fit, and emotional load in language selection, making it stand out from the background language and gain salience in the discourse, but it is also reflected in the reader's active retrieval and meaning construction of these language forms based on their own embodied cognitive schema, life experience, and cultural memory in the process of understanding, thus completing the reorganization of text images and emotions in embodied experience.

Embodied-Cognitive Semantic-Salience Mechanism of Object-Related Dialect Vocabulary

The vocabulary of object-related dialect is expressed through the embodiment of regional entities (such as agricultural tools, food, animals, plants, etc.) and is given significant perceptual priority by the writer. This expression is based on the activation of the writer's empirical schema and cultural prototype, which makes dialect vocabulary foreground-oriented from background information in the discourse, forming a salient center of cultural imagery. For readers, this type of vocabulary, due to its distinct regional color and sensibility, can trigger multimodal experiences such as visual and olfactory perception, evoke local memories and spatial belonging at the cognitive level, and thus construct narrative scenes with cultural depth and emotional warmth.

On the one hand, the semantic salience of object-related dialect vocabulary stems from the writer's embodied experience and cultural identity. In Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, natural environment words such as "ri tou" (sun), "He jie" (a street along the river), "xi kou" (mouth of a stream), "du tou" (ferry crossing site), "qing shi" (local green stone), and "shan qu" (rugged hill rich in earth and stone) not only describe specific geographical features but also reflect the author's deep understanding of human nature and Xiangxi culture. Due to their high perceptuality and cultural archetype, these dialects have achieved significant salience in the language coding process and have become the focal form of conveying local imagery and humanistic emotions. Through conscious selection and arrangement, the writer embeds these dialect words into the narrative framework, elevating them from the background language to the foreground language and achieving the transformation from language form to cultural imagery.

On the other hand, the salient effect of dialect vocabulary is further constructed in the reader's reading. Based on embodied cognitive schema theory and experiential understanding, readers will automatically retrieve their own life experience, cultural knowledge and emotional memory when receiving the words of the object dialect, and fill in the semantics and emotional resonance of these words. For example, in the narrative of *Border Town*, natural phenomena dialects such as "zha dian" (lightning) and "Xing zi" (star) not only construct the mystery of nature in Xiangxi, but also inspire readers' reverence for the power of nature and philosophical experience of the impermanence of life. Another example is "Zongba ye" (leaves used for wrapping glutinous rice dumplings), "xi dianxin" (delicate local pastries), "caoxie erzi" (straw sandal straps), "zao kou" (firewood inlet of a traditional stove), and other utensils and food dialects. Readers not only understand the actual meaning during reception, but also feel the simplicity of life and the warmth of culture, so as to complete the overall embodied cognition of Xiangxi's ecology, material culture, and survival wisdom.

The key to the strong semantic salience function of object-related dialect vocabulary lies in the high coupling between the perceptual priority of the formal layer and the cultural depth of the semantic layer. This coupling makes it have a significant attention-guiding effect and emotional mobilization ability in the text. Especially in the construction of characters and narrative atmosphere, object dialects often serve as image nodes to participate in plot progression and emotional rendering. For example, in *The Field of Life and Death*, words such as “yizi” (traditional soap), “bainang” (sheep’s rumen), and “xizi” (woven mat) not only depict scenes of poverty, but also serve as external representations of the characters’ psychological and emotional oppression, strengthening the narrative tension and humanistic care of the text. The embodied cognition gained by readers in language experience is not only the reproduction of specific objects, but also the emotional re-experience of life hardships and character destinies.

Embodied-Cognitive Semantic-Salience Mechanism of Person-Related Dialect Vocabulary

Personal dialect vocabulary, with its highly social pragmatic attributes, reflects complex identity codes in kinship relationships, generational titles, and social etiquette. The writer chooses specific personal dialect words in the narrative, not only conveying semantics, but also guiding readers to identify the social positioning, emotional stance, and power relationships of characters through the salience of social frameworks. Readers need to rely on their own social experience and communication prototypes for pragmatic decoding, enabling cognitive activation of the social meaning of language forms. In this way, the multi-dimensional construction of character images can be realized.

In *Border Town*, Shen Congwen frequently used dialectal terms such as “xifu” (wife), “xin jia niang” (bride), and “huang hua guniang” (virgin maiden), reflecting the author’s profound embodied cognition of marriage ethics and gender roles in western Hunan. The term “xifu” (wife) not only refers to a family role, but also contains gender cultural assumptions such as obedience and housekeeping; the terms “huang hua guniang” (virgin maiden) and “xin jia niang” (bride) reflect the transition of a woman’s identity from a young girl to a married woman and the accompanying social evaluation mechanism. Through the explicit arrangement of these titles, the writer makes the characters incorporated into the gender order of Xiangxi rural society at the linguistic level, highlighting the structural dilemma of women’s fate. Readers use vocabulary such as “xifu” (wife) to evoke social patterns about traditional marriage structure and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law ethics, further activate emotional experience on the basis of semantic understanding, and realize emotional resonance and cultural identity of the characters. Because of its distinctive cultural marking, dialect vocabulary constitutes an embodied cognitive channel for readers to enter the inner world of the characters.

In *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Zhao Shuli’s use of dialect pronouns such as “po jia” (husband’s family), “xiao die” (husband’s younger brother), “dong jia” (neighbor to the east), and “xi jia” (neighbor to the west) also reflects a deep embodied cognition of the kinship and geographical relationships in the rural areas of southeast Shanxi. “xiao die” (husband’s younger brother) has both intimacy and hierarchical attributes, which strengthens the power structure within the family; the “po jia” (husband’s family) not only positions the marital belonging of women, but also symbolizes their subordinate status in the marriage system. The writer systematically embeds this kind of expression into the narrative context to form a

clear network of character relationships, so that the social attributes of the characters' identities can be highly semantically highlighted. For local readers with relevant cultural experience, these dialect pronouns are high-frequency expressions in daily communication, which can quickly mobilize their embodied cognitive schemas about family hierarchy and marriage ethics. For readers with different cultural backgrounds, lexical items such as "dad" and "home" also have sufficient semantic clues to assist in contextual understanding. This kind of embodied cognitive activation not only realizes the accurate construction of the social position of the characters, but also deepens the reader's overall embodied cognition of the rural social structure.

In *The Field of Life and Death*, Xiao Hong uses dialect names such as "an" (I), "feng qiong po" (a poor woman who survives on mending clothes), "Lao Zhuang" (an elder from the village), and "hong lian chang ren" (a tall man with a red face) to create a picture of the northeastern countryside where gender oppression and class contradictions are intertwined. As a social label for poor women, "feng qiong po" (a poor woman who survives on mending clothes) has a sense of life in its semantics, but in fact it contains a cultural metaphor of debasement and exclusion, reflecting the writer's deep sympathy and critical awareness of the marginal fate of women. Through the prominent effect of "feng qiong po", readers can quickly identify the character's class attributes and complete the emotional grasp of the fate of the characters with the help of the intersectional schema of gender and class. The first-person pronoun "an" (I) evokes the reader's embodied cognitive association with the simple image of the peasant woman in Northeast China because of its regional colloquial color. On the other hand, "hong lian chang ren" (a tall man with a red face) uses physical appearance as a cue, so that the reader can form a quick judgment of the character's personality (such as irritable and rude), and enhances the participation of the language form in the construction of the character's image.

The "an po po" (my mother-in-law) and "qu xin" (get married) in *Lotus Lake* show Sun Li's delicate embodied cognition of the role of women in the context of family structure and war. The "an" in "an po po" (my mother-in-law) embodies the character's oral identity and the everydayness of kinship, while the cultural schema activated by the word "mother-in-law" places women under the dual oppression of elder authority and ethical norms. Through this dialectal salience, the writer expresses a deep embodied cognition about the situation of rural women in the context of war. During the process of reception, readers use the family ethics schema and wartime experience imagination to realize the embodied cognition of the tension of the characters' identities and empathy for their psychological dilemmas. The "qu xin" (get married) also semantically carries the impact of war on the marriage system, highlighting the uncertainty of women's fate in the great changes in society. The conciseness and salience of the words enable readers to quickly enter the emotional field of the narrative and complete the perception of social and ethical changes in the language experience.

In *Water Burial*, the word "er ma" (you son of a bitch) shows the emotional outburst of the characters in the form of extremely vulgar language. Through the fierce expression of this dialectal expression, the writer reinforces the anger and struggle of the character Luo Mao on the margins of society, and his linguistic behavior itself constitutes an emotional rebellion against the social power structure. When the reader perceives this word, they will be shocked by its abrupt vulgarity, and thus become more sensitive to depression and powerlessness of

the characters. The semantic salience of the word not only strengthens the marginal identity of the characters, but also mobilizes the moral judgment and emotional resonance of the readers, making the language a direct conveyor of the characters' fate and emotions.

In modern Chinese classic vernacular novels, person-related dialect vocabulary is not only the embodiment of local language resources, but also an indispensable and important component of the salience mechanism of literary language, which shows the theoretical tension and practical value of embodied cognitive linguistics in revealing the relationship between language, experience, and meaning.

Embodied-Cognitive Semantic-Salience Mechanism of Action-Related Dialect Vocabulary

Action dialect vocabulary often plays the role of conveying the emotions and psychological states of characters in literary narratives. The writer amplifies the details of the characters' behaviors through spatially grounded action words, so that they form a salient unit in the narrative flow and enhance the emotional intensity and narrative tension of the discourse. During reception, readers transform the action language into a psychological picture through mirror simulation and emotional projection, so as to enter the hearts of the characters and achieve emotional resonance and experiential immersion.

In *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, the action-related dialect words "tian chuan" (summon), "chu tou" (stand up for), "he shuo he shuo" (mediate), and "wan hua" (joke) constitute the prototype of communicative practice in the daily interaction of rural society. In the writer's embodied cognition, "tian chuan" (summon) not only refers to the dissemination of information, but also implies the public opinion mechanism of rumor construction and social control, which reflects the penetration of language into power relations in village governance. "chu tou" (stand up for) is a behaviorally salient word, which marks the cognitive highlight of the individual's breakthrough through oppression and struggle for the status of the subject in the discourse, and constitutes a linguistic reversal of the local power structure. Through these action dialects, the writer foreshadows the interactive logic of the rural social order through specific behavioral markers. In the reader's embodied cognition, these dialect words activate the empirical archetypes in the context of communication. "tian chuan" (summon) triggers collective memory and social anxiety about "terrible words" and "wind and rumors", while "chu tou" (stand up for) connects the emotional schema of individual will awakening and structural confrontation, and evokes moral empathy for the characters' acts of resistance.

In *The Field of Life and Death*, action-related dialect words such as "cui zhe" (to spit in disgust), "bai hui" (to destroy), "mi zhe" (to get something in the eye), "guai wan zhe pao" (to run crookedly), and "zuo zhe shi zi" (to make gestures) show the writer's deep embodied cognition of the spiritual picture of women at the bottom of society. Through these action words, which are highly regional and emotionally concentrated, the writer verbalizes and enacts the instinctive reactions of rural women when they encounter oppression and humiliation. Among them, "cui zhe" (to spit in disgust) is not only a weak expression of disgust, but also a marginal behavioral strategy for the maintenance of dignity in humiliating situations. "mi zhe" (to get something in the eye) reflects the character's state of consciousness under spiritual oppression, and the language form itself carries the function of psychological salience. During the reading process, readers internalize actions through the mechanism of mirror neurons, activating language as concrete mental images. At the moment

of spitting, the reader may interpret it as a kind of struggling resistance, and then generate a deep embodied cognition of the dignity of the female subject in the perceptual structure. “bai hui” (to destroy) is an action expression with the color of ethical judgment, guiding readers to carry out embodied cognitive confrontation and emotional reflection on gender order and feudal discourse.

In *Lotus Lake*, Sun Li uses action-related dialect words such as “ba zhe chuan bang” (grabbing onto the side of the boat), “fu shui lao dong xi” (to float and retrieve objects), “zheng teng” (to rise in steam), and “yao he” (to shout), fusing women’s physical behavior and the historical dimension of the war narrative into a concrete narrative identity. In the writer’s embodied cognition, these actions not only refer to the actual labor skills, but also contain multiple cultural messages such as national survival, women’s responsibility, and group spirit. “Fu shui lao dong xi” (to float and retrieve objects) not only constitutes a daily life scene, but also an embodied cognitive reflection of women’s dual responsibilities of family and nation in national disasters. In the action simulation of “surviving on the water”, the reader activates the cultural schema of national crisis, family breakdown, and female fortitude, so as to construct an embodied cognitive channel between action language and emotional understanding. This kind of semantic salience through specific action words not only enriches the life tension of the characters, but also expands the space of gender narration in the war narrative.

In *Water Burial*, action-related dialect words such as “niu zhu” (to grab), “pao bai ma” (to scurry about like a swarm of ants), “de se” (to look smug), and “niu zui shi yan” (to twist one’s mouth and roll one’s eyes) constitute a brutal presentation of the violent reality and the fate of marginal individuals. At the level of the writer’s embodied cognition, “niu zhu” (to grab) is not only the embodiment of violence, but also an allusion to the oppressive norms of individual freedom in the social structure. “pao bai ma” (to scurry about like a swarm of ants) is used as a regional satirical expression, which reinforces the tragic situation of the protagonist Luo Mao being stigmatized and excluded. The action tension in the ontology of language forms a focal point in the narrative, outlining a closed and violent social context. When the reader encounters these action words, they will generate a sympathetic understanding and critical embodied cognition of the fate of the characters through the mobilization of the physical experience schema of “suppression-response”. Especially in satirical action words such as “niu zui shi yan” (to twist one’s mouth and roll one’s eyes), the physical effect of language directly acts on the reader’s emotional system, making them intuitively feel the oppressive atmosphere brought about by the coldness of power and the rupture of ethics.

Research Summary

Research Findings

Under the framework of the salience theory of epistemic linguistics, this paper takes Shen Congwen’s *Border Town*, Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli’s *The Marriage of Xiao’er Hei*, Sun Li’s *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian’ai’s *Water Burial* as corpus texts, systematically explores the semantic salience mechanism of dialect words in discourse, and constructs the embodied-cognitive-emotional synergistic pathway of “writer’s embodied cognition-language salience-reader’s embodied cognition”.

The study yielded the following key findings.

The semantic salience of dialect words is rooted in the writer's embodied cognitive choice, which is the linguistic manifestation of embodied experience and cultural schema. The writer's use of dialect is not a rhetorical device on the surface of the language, but a product of the writer's in-depth embodied cognition based on regional life, cultural psychology, and narrative intention. The writer's choice of language constitutes the first driving force of the salience mechanism, and is the core of the embodied cognitive orientation of the salient information.

Semantic salience relies on context nesting and structural layout to realize the focus aggregation function of dialect words. Dialect words are not used in isolation, but rely on the arrangement of contextual positioning and syntactic structure to form a stable focus position in the narrative chain. The synergy between language structure and cultural context makes dialect vocabulary the embodied cognitive core in the logic of plot advancement and character behavior.

Readers realize that through schema activation and emotional resonance, the reprocessing and meaning generation of salient information is completed. In the process of acceptance, readers form an embodied cognitive picture of dialect words based on their existing life experience and social memory, and reconstruct the semantics with the help of emotional connection. Salient words not only convey semantics, but also carry the functions of emotional contagion and value evaluation.

Different types of dialect words constitute a triple linkage structure of "person-action-object" in semantic salience. Person-related dialects focus on social identity and interpersonal relationship coding, as seen in *Border Town* and *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, which construct an "ethical role network"; action-related dialects focus on emotional expression and externalization of body image, especially in *The Field of Life and Death* and *Water Burial*; object-related dialects point to the construction of cultural space and narrative atmosphere, such as *Lotus Lake*, which evokes national memory and family–nation emotions through local objects. These three types of salience paths support each other in semantic structure and constitute a three-dimensional salience system in the text meaning field.

Semantic salience is a linguistic strategy of value construction and aesthetic guidance, which reflects the writer's cultural stance and narrative ethics. The salience of dialect words is not only a narrative resource, but also an expression of the writer's emotional judgment and social concepts. For example, the mildness and softening of the dialect in *Border Town* constructs an idealized vernacular ethical order; the rough and fierce action-related dialect in *Water Burial* directly refers to the violent structure of the countryside, expressing an accusation and criticism of the fate of the underclass. The salience mechanism not only serves semantic prominence, but also is an important means for literary language to assume the function of social criticism and emotional guidance.

Research Contributions and Future Prospects

Based on the salience theory of embodied cognitive linguistics, this study constructs a three-dimensional analytical model of "writer's embodied cognition-language salience-readers' embodied cognition", and systematically explores the semantic salience mechanism

of dialect words in Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhao Shuli's *The Marriage of Xiao'er Hei*, Sun Li's *Lotus Lake*, and Jian Xian'ai's *Water Burial*.

The research has made the following contributions at the level of theoretical deepening, path innovation, and methodological practice:

(1) Promote the localization and expansion of salience theory in the study of literary language. In the past, the salience theory mostly focused on semantics and pragmatics, and its applicability in literary discourse still needs to be explored. This paper introduces this theory into the study of modern Chinese vernacular novels, emphasizes the salience mechanism of dialect vocabulary in multiple contexts, and systematically examines the salience of dialects in texts from the perspective of "language-embodied cognition-culture" integration. It expands the scope of application and cultural explanatory power of salience theory.

(2) Construct the cognitive path of "writer's embodied cognition–language salience–reader's embodied cognition".

Breaking through the static dimension of traditional language analysis, this paper embeds the salience mechanism into the whole process of literary communication, revealing how linguistic salience can become an intermediary mechanism connecting the author's embodied cognitive intention and the reader's perceptual structure. This approach not only explains how writers conduct language selection based on cultural schemas, but also reveals how readers can achieve the reconstruction of meaning through the experiential picture, which provides a highly operational theoretical model for the integration of embodied cognitive linguistics and receptive aesthetics.

(3) Propose three types of dialect salience function models of "person-action-object".

Based on the systematic analysis of the five novels, this paper summarizes three types of high-frequency dialect words, corresponding to the three narrative dimensions of identity coding, behavior description, and environmental construction, revealing their functional differences and complementary synergies in the salience mechanism, and promoting the linguistic differentiation and functional refinement of dialect word research.

Although this paper has achieved some results in theoretical integration and methodological practice, there are still many directions worthy of in-depth exploration. In the future, more regional texts can be introduced, such as dialect novels from Southwest China, Jiangnan, Fujian, and Guangdong, to explore the similarities and differences in the salience strategies and embodied cognitive characteristics of different regional dialects, and to construct a genealogy of Chinese dialect narratives. With the increasing diversity of literary forms, the research can be extended to the salience mechanism of dialects in multimodal narratives such as film and television, broadcasting, and short videos, so as to promote the theoretical extension of salience theory in cross-media contexts.

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