

A Comparative Study on the Semantic Representation of "吃 / Ăn" and Their Derived Words Related to "Food" in Chinese and Vietnamese

Ha Thi Huong Giang¹ & Doan Ngoc Thach¹

¹ Faculty of Foreign Languages, Thanh Dong University, Haiduong, Vietnam

Correspondence: Doan Ngoc Thach, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Thanh Dong University, Haiduong, Vietnam

Received: February 13, 2025 Accepted: March 9, 2025 Online Published: March 12, 2025

Abstract

With social development and the progress of linguistic culture, the word “吃” (chī) has gradually extended its original semantic meaning to include the concept of "food." The monosyllabic words "吃" (chī) in Chinese and "Ăn" in Vietnamese originally referred to the act of eating, functioning as verbs, while their objects—"food" or "things to eat"—are nouns. Both concepts belong to the domain of dietary cognition and are closely related. This study focuses on the [-eating] meaning of "吃" (chī) and "Ăn" and their derived words in Chinese and Vietnamese. By comparing the semantic similarities and differences in their representation of "food" and analyzing specific linguistic data from two corpora, this paper explores their variations in semantic and cultural connotations and interprets the deep cultural reasons behind these differences.

Keywords: "吃" (chī), "Ăn", [-eating] meaning, Chinese-Vietnamese comparison

1. Introduction

With social development and the advancement of linguistic culture, the original semantic meaning of "吃" (chī) has gradually been extended to include the concept of "food." In previous studies, Niu Yali and Xie Gang, in *A Semantic and Cognitive Study of "吃" in the Modern Chinese Dictionary* [Niu Yali, Xie Gang. A Semantic and Cognitive Study of "吃" in the Modern Chinese Dictionary [J]. Journal of Suihua University, 2011(2):3], pointed out that each clear and fixed meaning of "吃" appearing in sentences or fixed structures, along with its corresponding patient object, should be assigned a separate semantic entry. This study clarified the semantic entry of "吃" in the sense of "food."

Additionally, Guo Jinqiu, in *An Analysis of the Systematic and Complex Nature of the Metaphor of "吃" in Chinese* [Guo Jinqiu. An Analysis of the Systematic and Complex Nature of the Metaphor of "吃" in Chinese [D]. Southwest University, 2019.], noted that metaphorical expressions related to "吃" are very common in Chinese. The study also proposed that, in the dimension of food, the concept of "food" is partially projected onto the concept of "people," forming the metaphorical concept of "people as food."

From existing research, it can be seen that studies focusing on the semantic meaning of "吃" as "food" are relatively limited. Most research centers on the metaphorical meaning of "吃," while in-depth analysis of its semantic function in representing "food" remains scarce. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative studies between different languages. A comparative analysis of the "吃/Ăn" expressions for "food" in Chinese and Vietnamese can help language learners better understand the usage of "吃," making further in-depth research necessary.

The monosyllabic words "吃" (chī) in Chinese and "Ăn" in Vietnamese originally referred to the act of eating, functioning as verbs, while their objects—"food" or "things to eat"—are nouns. Both concepts belong to the domain of dietary cognition [Gao Luyun. *An Analysis of the Metaphorical Cognition and Cultural Connotation of the Chinese "吃" Word Group* [D]. Nanjing Normal University, 2020.] and share a certain degree of correlation. Therefore, in actual language use, people often use "吃" (chī) and "Ăn" to refer to food or things to eat in a generalized way.

This semantic extension is derived from the prototypical meaning of "吃" (chī) and "Ăn," as illustrated in the following diagram:

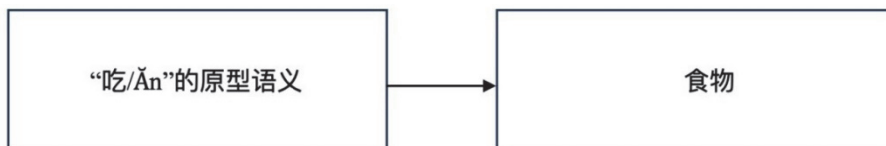


Figure 1. The Semantic Extension of "吃" (chī) / "Ăn" to Represent "Food"

As shown in Figure 1, "吃" (chī) and "Ăn" are semantically related to "food." Therefore, when used as nouns, both "吃" (chī) in Chinese and "Ăn" in Vietnamese can carry the meaning of "food." The following section will provide a detailed comparison and analysis of this shared meaning of "food" in both languages.

2. Semantic Explanation of "吃" (chī) / "Ăn" and Their Derived Words Representing "Food" in Chinese and Vietnamese

The meaning of "吃" (chī) as "food" has a historical evolution that can be traced back to ancient times. During the Pre-Qin and Han periods, the core vocabulary used to describe eating and drinking was "食" (shí) and "饮" (yǐn). However, as feudal society developed, the word "食" (shí) acquired multiple meanings, leading to ambiguity in communication, which affected daily life and work. Over time, "吃" (chī) gradually replaced "食" (shí) and became the central verb in the semantic field of eating and drinking [Liao Xiting (LIU HY DINH). *A Comparative Study on the Semantic and Cultural Aspects of the Chinese "吃" and Vietnamese "ăn" in Colloquial Expressions* [D]. Fujian Normal University, 2014.].

As "吃" (chī) replaced "食" (shí), it primarily functioned as a verb. However, its transformation into a noun meaning "food" was also easily understood, as it represented the transition from the action of eating to the object being eaten. This is an example of metonymy occurring within the domain of dietary cognition.

By the Ming and Qing dynasties, this usage had already appeared in classical literature. For instance, in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Chapter 27):

"At most, they are just those antique gold, jade, bronze, and porcelain pieces with no place to put them, or else silk, food, and clothing."

With societal development, such expressions have become increasingly common. In modern times, words and phrases such as "吃喝" (chīhē, eating and drinking), "小吃" (xiǎochī, snacks), "ăn vặt" (Vietnamese for snacks), and "Không lo ăn" (Vietnamese for 'no worries about food') have become widely used in daily life.

3. Examples and Analysis of "吃" (chī) and Its Derived Words Representing "Food" in Chinese

In Chinese, the use of "吃" (chī) to mean "food" is widespread, with many fixed expressions incorporating this meaning. Based on a search in the BCC Corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University, we analyze examples of "吃" (chī) in its semantic function as "food."

According to the search results from the BCC Corpus, common examples are as follows:

Table 1. Statistical Data on "吃" (chī) and Its Derived Words Representing "Food" in Chinese

Sememe	Corpus	Quantity
Food	小吃	11497
	吃食	1922
	吃喝	496
	吃用	320
	零吃	41
	吃量	25

As shown in Table 1, the high-frequency data collected from the BCC Corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University all contain the morpheme "吃" (chī) in the sense of "food." The data has been arranged according to occurrence frequency, and a detailed analysis of each example will be provided below.

3.1 "小吃" (xiǎochī – snacks)

"小吃" is a fixed phrase in Chinese, appearing **11,497 times** in the BCC Corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University. It refers to a category of food with distinctive flavors and regional characteristics, usually made from local ingredients, reflecting the local material culture and social landscape. Semantically, "小吃" can be understood as "small-sized food." The following examples from the BCC Corpus illustrate this usage:

- ① *I have been running a small snack business for five years. Although I don't earn much, my vision has broadened, and I have gained more experience.*
- ② *Recently, they introduced a special snack at the station—Guilin Rice Noodles.*

From examples ① and ②, it is evident that "吃" in "小吃" refers to "food" and functions as a noun.

3.2 "吃食" (chīshí – food) and "吃喝" (chīhē – food and drinks)

Both "吃食" and "吃喝" convey the meaning of food, appearing **1,922 times** and **496 times** in the BCC Corpus, respectively. In both words, "吃" represents "food." "吃食" specifically refers to food, especially meals, and was commonly used in *Dream of the Red Chamber* to refer to food for entertaining family members. "吃喝" typically refers to both eating and drinking or food and beverages in general. The following examples from the BCC Corpus further illustrate their usage:

- ③ *He was eating while throwing some food to it...*
- ④ *At least we have enough food and drinks.*

In both sentences, "吃" in "吃食" and "吃喝" serves as a noun, meaning "food."

3.3 "吃用" (chīyòng – daily necessities and food expenses)

"吃用" is another commonly used term, appearing **320 times** in the BCC Corpus. It refers to food, clothing, and other living expenses and can be understood as "daily provisions." The following examples from the BCC Corpus illustrate its meaning:

- ⑤ *From The Story of Heroic Sons and Daughters, Chapter 36: "This concerns the master's household affairs, everyone's food and provisions; don't just try to be agreeable and end up making a mistake later."*
- ⑥ *They could only rely on raising sheep and horses to sell to the Han people in exchange for food and necessities.*

From examples ⑤ and ⑥, it is clear that "吃" in "吃用" functions as a noun, meaning "food" or "things to eat."

3.4 "零吃" (língchī – snacks, small bites)

"零吃" appears **41 times** in the BCC Corpus and is similar in meaning to "零食" (língshí, snacks). Here, "吃" replaces "食" (shí, food) while maintaining the meaning of "food." The following examples illustrate this usage:

- ⑦ *Bought a whole cart of snacks.*
- ⑧ *Peng Liang and Xiaopo were walking on the village street, where a vendor was selling small snacks.*

From examples ⑦ and ⑧, it is evident that "零吃" is a noun, with "吃" referring to "food."

3.5 "吃量" (chīliàng – food intake, appetite)

"吃量" appears **25 times** in the BCC Corpus and refers to a person's or animal's food intake. Here, "吃" is nominalized, meaning "the amount of food consumed." The following examples illustrate this usage:

- ⑨ *The newly weaned pig had a poor appetite and ate very little, so she chopped the feed into smaller pieces.*
- ⑩ *I still went to the cafeteria for breakfast and realized I had quite a large appetite.*

From examples ⑨ and ⑩, "吃量" refers to the amount of food consumed, with "吃" carrying the meaning of "food."

4. An Example Analysis of the Vietnamese Word "Ăn" and Its Compounds Indicating "Food"

The semantic item of "food" expressed by the Vietnamese word "Ăn" and its compounds is not numerous. There are only two idiomatic expressions: "Ăn vặt" (snacks) and "Lo ăn lo mặc" (not having to worry about food and clothing). Now, in combination with the search in the Vietnamese S Project Corpus, an example analysis will be conducted on the semantic item of "Ăn" in Vietnamese that means "food". According to the search results of the Vietnamese S Project Corpus, the common usage examples are as follows:

Table 2. A Statistical Analysis of the Corpus of the Semantic Item of "Food" Expressed by the Chinese Word "吃" ("chī")

Sememe	Corpus	Quantity
Eat in a certain way, eat with a certain tool	Ăn vặt Lo ăn, Không lo ăn	98 463

(1) "Ăn vặt" The first part of speech of "Ăn vặt" is a verb, which means "to eat snacks or have light meals". For example, "Chúng tôi rất thích ăn vặt trên lớp học." (We really like to secretly eat snacks during class.) In this example, "Ăn" means "to eat", and "vật" means "small", specifically referring to small pieces of food. So, "Ăn vặt" means "to eat small pieces of food". However, through the mechanism of semantic shift, the verb "Ăn vặt" has derived into a noun "Ăn vặt", which means "snacks, light meals, small pieces of food". Examples: ① In Hanoi, tourists don't have to go to luxurious and expensive restaurants to enjoy delicious dishes. They can choose a roasted bird stall right by the roadside in the Old Quarter and shouldn't miss out on the street snacks. (Ở Hà Nội, khách du lịch không cần phải vào các nhà hàng sang trọng và đắt tiền mới có thể thưởng thức các món ăn ngon. Họ có thể chọn một hàng chim quay ngay bên lề đường trong khu phố cổ và không nên bỏ qua những món ăn vặt trên phố.) ② Besides the lectures, students are also provided with snacks, such as fruits, candies, and biscuits, to stimulate their desire to study. (Ngoài các bài giảng, học sinh còn được cho đồ ăn vặt, như là trái cây, kẹo bánh, để kích thích ham muốn học tập của các em.) (2) "Lo ăn", "Không lo ăn" The phrases "Lo ăn" and "Không lo ăn" have a relatively high frequency of use as collected in the Vietnamese S Project Corpus, and they mean "not having to worry about food". Examples: ③ With the money saved throughout his life as an "ordinary teacher", along with additional contributions from friends after several fundraising campaigns, Mr. Koyama came to Vietnam to open a charity home. There, he gathered homeless children under his warm roof, provided them with food and clothing, and tutored them so that they could acquire a useful skill in society. (Với số tiền dành dụm được trong suốt cuộc đời "nhà giáo quèn" cộng với bạn bè thêm thắt sau những lần vận động, ông Koyama sang Việt Nam mở nhà tình thương. Ở đó, ông tập hợp những đứa trẻ vô gia cư về mái ấm của mình lo ăn lo mặc rồi kèm cặp để chúng có được một nghề hữu ích trong xã hội.) ④ According to Mr. Bùi Đức Hạnh, the Chief Representative of Air Asia in Hanoi, today about 300 passengers (mainly Vietnamese) can't return to Hanoi because the company's flights have been cancelled. "Passengers will have to reschedule their flights after the airport announces its reopening. Since this is a case of force majeure, passengers will have to take care of their own food and accommodation. Air Asia doesn't have a compensation system for passengers," Mr. Hạnh said. (Theo ông Bùi Đức Hạnh, Trưởng đại diện hãng hàng không Air Asia tại Hà Nội, hôm nay có khoảng 300 hành khách (chủ yếu là người Việt) không thể về Hà Nội do các chuyến bay của hãng bị huỷ. "Khách sẽ phải dời ngày bay sau khi sân bay có thông báo mở cửa trở lại. Do đây là trường hợp bất khả kháng nên hành khách sẽ buộc phải tự lo ăn ở. Air Asia không có chế độ bồi thường cho khách", ông Hạnh nói.)

5. Conclusion

Based on the above examples of the semantics of "吃/Ăn" in Chinese and Vietnamese and their related words indicating "food", it is found that there are differences in the frequency of use of "吃/Ăn" in Chinese and Vietnamese and their related words indicating "food". Firstly, during the process of sorting out the corpus, it is found that whether in Chinese or Vietnamese, there is a large difference in the number of corpus materials related to the semantics of "吃/Ăn" in Chinese and Vietnamese and their related words indicating "food". This shows that in the specific process of language use, the semantics of "吃" indicating "food" has differences in the specific usage in China and Vietnam. Moreover, in the specific corpus, there are also differences in the specific types of usage, which is also related to the language habits and social cultures of the two countries to a certain extent. The corpus materials in which "吃" in Chinese indicates "food" are more abundant, and the forms are also more diverse. For example, there are expressions like "小吃" (snacks), "吃食" (food), "吃喝" (food and drink), "吃用" (food and daily necessities), etc. And in these cases, "吃" all expresses the meaning of "food" and has become a fixed collocation in language use. In contrast, in Vietnamese, the examples of "Ăn" indicating "food" are only "Ăn vặt" and "Lo ăn, Không lo ăn". Moreover, the first part of speech of "Ăn vặt" is a verb, which means "to eat snacks or have light meals". For example, "Chúng tôi rất thích ăn vặt trên lớp học." (We really like to secretly eat snacks during class.) In this example, "Ăn" means "to eat", and "vật" means "small", specifically referring to small pieces of food. Here, "Ăn" does not directly indicate "food". Therefore, through analysis, it is found that when "吃" in Chinese indicates "food", its part of speech is mostly a noun, while when "Ăn" in Vietnamese indicates the meaning of "food", it is mostly a verb, and a deeper understanding of the semantics is required. In conclusion, through the examples and comparative analysis of "吃/Ăn" in Chinese and Vietnamese and their related words indicating "food", it is found that there are significant differences in the frequency of use of "吃/Ăn" in Chinese and

Vietnamese and their related words indicating "food", which is related to the language habits and social cultures of China and Vietnam to a certain extent.

References

Ren, S. (2020). *Discourse, grammar and cognition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Xie, R., & Li, H. (2023). The historical evolution and optimization and upgrading of the Sino-Vietnamese cultural communication model. *Southeast Communication*, (11), 86-92.

Xu, J. (2023). Lexical typology in China. *Language and Translation*, (02), 13-19.

Xu, Z., & Fang, Z. (2022). Looking at the metaphors of "eat" in Chinese and Turkish from the perspective of metaphorical orientation. *Journal of Harbin University*, 43(01), 101-104.

Zhao, Y. (2014). *Cognitive linguistics*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).