

# A Linguistic Exploration of the Complex Emotion ENVY: Comparing Mandarin *XIANMU* and English ENVY

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## ABSTRACT

Emotion has been widely studied interdisciplinarily. However, relatively few studies have paid attention to the linguistically confounded (Cristiano & Maria, 2009) complex emotions (Johnson-Laird, 1987/1989) of the loosely synonymous pair of *envy* and *jealousy* (Parrot & Smith 1993). ENVY and JEALOUSY are often regarded as comparable complex emotions because they are sometimes used interchangeably and they both contain the shared basic emotion of disgust. In view of the claim that every culture has multiple, sometimes quite different, ways of nuancing the same emotions or emotive words, the present study aims to investigate how the Mandarin ‘equivalent’ of ENVY, *XIANMU*, is understood in the language.

Specifically, the present study aims to explore how one’s idea of the more complex emotion, *XIANMU*, can be influenced by the resources available in one’s language, and to what extent, *XIANMU* is similar to or different from its English equivalent, ENVY. The present study is mainly devoted to the grammatical usages of and the pragmatic functions associated with the two pairs of “near-synonyms”: they are respectively *XIANMU* (admiration-envy) vs. *JIDU* (jealousy) and ENVY vs. JEALOUSY.

Based on our pilot study, Mandarin *XIANMU* is found to be generally primed by words containing the embodied attributes of mouth and eyes. Expressions used to satisfy one’s desire of food define the original sense of *XIANMU*, a word typically used to express one’s longing for what one lacks. Furthermore, our data show that *XIANMU* is different in its use from its English translation of ENVY: *XIANMU* can be interpreted and understood either positively or negatively as two different emotions, depending on the perspectives of the cognitive subject. It could be used in a negative sense commonly found in its English equivalent ENVY, especially when the negative emotion of *JIDU* (jealousy) is implied. It can also positively emphasize the desired outcome when one wishes to possess the much desired due to his lack of it. Based on corpus data, our study further confirms that an overt cause is normally mentioned in the case of *XIANMU* (94%), whereas such overt cause is not usually

mentioned (only 26% does) in the case of *JIDU*. We suspect intersubjectivity (Traugott 2003) is at work here when describing one's emotion of being envious. Such is not the case as observed in the English ENVY/JEALOUSY pair. For ENVY and JEALOUSY, an overt cause is usually mentioned, and they are used interchangeably.

The close tie between emotions and linguistic expressions shows that different connotations of emotion words can be triggered by cognitive and cultural factors. For example, *XIANMU* can either mean ENVY or ADMIRATION, depending on the perspective taken by the cognitive subject in the very context. *XIANMU* therefore should not be treated as a linguistic equivalent of the English *ENVY*.

Keywords: Complex emotion; *XIANMU* (admiration/envy); perspectival subjectivity

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