

## ‘东西’是什么东西? ——A semantic study of *Dongxi* in Mandarin Chinese

**Abstract:** This study conducts a semantic and cognitive analysis of the Mandarin Chinese word *dongxi* (东西), a highly frequent yet underexamined term whose literal components “east” and “west” have undergone significant semantic expansion. Drawing on 2,844 tokens from the Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese, the research identifies the major semantic domains of *dongxi* and explains the cognitive mechanisms that shape its broad polysemy.

The findings show that *dongxi* encompasses two overarching semantic categories: spatial meanings and entity-related meanings. Spatially, *dongxi* retains its historical association with east–west orientation, referring to concrete locations, distances, geographical divisions, cultural dichotomies, and metaphorical notions such as parting ways or diverging paths. These directional senses form the etymological base from which further meanings emerge.

Entity-related senses, however, display far greater variety and frequency. *Dongxi* may refer to specific items mentioned in context, general categories such as “types” or “kinds,” or vague, unspecified entities whose nature is inferred through shared knowledge—such as edible items, purchasable goods, or learnable content. It also functions as an expressive noun carrying evaluative meanings. When applied to humans, animals, or objects, *dongxi* can convey affection, disdain, humor, or contempt. In some instances, it acts as a purely emotive placeholder without pointing to any concrete referent. Overall, six semantic characteristics emerge: *dongxi* can denote known or unknown items; living or non-living entities; concrete or abstract concepts; positive or negative sentiments; and even “everything” in a broad ontological sense.

The study draws on cognitive linguistics to explain these semantic developments. Metaphorical extension accounts for the shift from spatial orientation to generalized notions of “things,” while metonymy motivates the use of *dongxi* as a stand-in for classes of objects or experiences. Prototype categorization clarifies how the term flexibly functions as either a basic-level or superordinate category. Image-schema theory—particularly container and orientation schemas—further illuminates how the original meanings of “dong” (a tied bag) and “xi” (a bird’s nest) facilitate later abstraction, enabling *dongxi* to operate as a conceptual “container” for diverse entities. Cognitive economy underlies the efficiency of using *dongxi* as an all-purpose noun in everyday discourse.

This study provides one of the first systematic mappings of *dongxi*’s semantic network, demonstrating how spatial terms can evolve into highly flexible lexical items. The findings contribute to cognitive semantic research and offer pedagogical implications for teaching Mandarin, especially regarding contextual and pragmatic vocabulary use.

**Keywords:** *Dongxi* (东西); semantic analysis; cognitive linguistics; metaphor and metonymy