

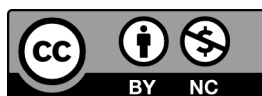
# Semantic Comparative Analysis of “麻 má” and “嫫 mā” in Mandarin Chinese and Hakka

Zirun Yan

East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai

**Abstract:** Both “má” (麻) and “mā” (嫫) are ancient Chinese characters whose meanings have undergone a long process of development and change, giving them a certain research value. The study conducts a semantic comparative analysis of 麻 and 嫫 in Mandarin Chinese and Hakka. By reviewing authoritative dictionaries and utilizing the CCL corpus (Center for Chinese Linguistics, PKU), the study systematically examines the semantic meanings of both words. The findings reveal that: (1) Mandarin and Hakka share five common meanings of 麻: “crop”, “hemp products”, “loss of sensation”, “tangled and messy”, and “quick”. Yet Hakka uniquely features action-oriented meanings such as “to lie down” and “sagacious”, the latter contrasting with the meaning of “foolish” in Mandarin. (2) Both Mandarin and Hakka share the general meaning of “female” in 嫫, but Hakka lacks the semantic usage of 嫫 as an address form. Instead, Hakka uses it to denote “female” or “female animals”, and even to refer to feminine characteristics in non-living objects. (3) While 嫫 reflects inter-generational relationships and respect within the family structure in Mandarin, Hakka emphasizes gender characteristics more explicitly.

**Keywords:** semantic contrast; Mandarin Chinese; Hakka; má (麻); mā (嫫)



Copyright © 2025 by author (s) and SciScan Publishing Limited

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## 1 Introduction

Hakka dialect belongs to the southern dialect of the Chinese language and has a long history and rich cultural connotations, and its unique phonetic, lexical, and grammatical structures make it occupy an important position among Chinese dialects. Hakka is widely spoken in Guangdong, Fujian, and Jiangxi. Meizhou, Huizhou, and Heyuan in Guangdong Province are considered the birthplace of Hakka culture. Xunwu in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, adjacent to Meixian County (a municipal district in Meizhou), is a pure Hakka county with a population of 330,000 within its borders, all of whom are Hakka folk. The Hakka language of Xunwu is a living fossil of the Middle Chinese and Song official language. In 6th January 2013, the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China issued a document agreeing to the establishment of a national “Hakka Culture (Gannan) Ecological Conservation Experimental Zone” in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, to protect the Hakka cultural forms with deep historical and cultural deposits, good

Corresponding author: Zirun Yan, East China University of Science and Technology.

Article Citation: Yan, Z. R. (2025). Semantic Comparative Analysis of “麻 má” and “嫫 mā” in Mandarin Chinese and Hakka. *Linguistics*, 7(2), 129-138.

state of survival, important value and distinctive features in a holistic manner.

In view of the fact that Xunwu and Meixian are close to each other, have similar cultures, and use similar Hakka, and that Xunwu has not yet issued an independent Hakka dialect word list, the study examines the semantic differences between “嫲” and “麻” based on the word list of the Meixian Hakka dialect, which is a representative of the Hakka dialect.

Both “嫲” and “麻” are ancient Chinese words whose semantics have undergone a long period of development and change, and have different connotations in Mandarin and dialects, respectively. The character “嫲” is the most common and representative of the Hakka dialect (X. Z. Huang, 1987), and its earliest form appeared in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, in which “嫲” denotes an elderly woman, especially a grandmother. The character “麻” was first used in the inscriptions on bones, and its shape resembles two plants hanging on a pole, symbolizing the hemp plant. Paleographers believe that the original meaning of “麻” is related to the hemp plant, like *cannabis sativa* and ramie. These plants played an important role in the agriculture and textile industry of ancient China, so the early semantic meaning of “麻” was mostly related to the plant itself and its processed products. Later, the word was extended to an abstract concept. The words “嫲” and “麻” seem to be unrelated and have their semantic development paths, but in Hakka, the use of “嫲” and “麻” overlaps. For example, “刀嫲” can be used as “刀麻”, the former appearing in the Taiwanese Hakka Dictionary which means “chopper”, while the latter appearing in *Report From Xunwu* written by Mao Zedong and meaning “kitchen knife”. The phenomenon of “嫲” being used as a suffix was explained by the “fertility cult” proposed by Lan (2005), suggesting that it originates from people’s observation of physical characteristics of the reproductive organs of female animals, i.e., “concave, not able to protrude”. However, this explanation is not universal because the belly of the knife is protruding, which is contrary to its explanation.

In view of the using overlap between “嫲” and “麻” in Hakka, the study compares the semantic meaning of the both words in Hakka and Mandarin Chinese, so as to deepen the public’s understanding of the words’ semantic differences and to promote the national standard Chinese while preserving the local dialect.

## 2 Literature Review

There are few semantic studies on “麻” and “嫲”, and current semantic studies on “麻” focuses on the two constructions, that is, “麻(了)” and “X麻了”. Wang and Cao (2023) analyzed the semantic evolution and pragmatization of “麻(了)” from diachronic perspective, and found that the lexical meaning of “麻” has undergone a shift from the figurative to the abstract. “麻” is originally a noun, referring to a kind of plant, but influenced by the metonymic mechanism of language, it is then associated with “loss of consciousness in the limbs”, and later the meaning is expanded to describe abstract experiences, thus contributing to the semantic defuzzification of “麻(了)”. Similarly, X. F. Huang (2024) examined the construct “X麻了”, which is popular on the Internet, and found that the word “麻” in the construct does not have a real meaning, but rather is abstractly defamiliarized to denote degree. The above studies show that the semantic meaning of “麻” has changed over time. But these studies have not sufficiently depicted the semantic meaning of the word “麻” and often make the word an add-on to a certain construction. So, examining “麻” quantitatively and meticulously is still needed.

The research on “嫲” focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, it is the study of the word “嫲” itself. Wen (2007) examined the etymology of “嫲” and concluded that “嫲” in Hakka dialect originated from “摩”, which is the colloquial word for mother in the period of centralized imperial rule and the original character is “母”, which a historical product of the southward migration of Hakka forefathers after the tumultuous years of Western Jin Dynasty. Ma (2015)

examined the morphological rationale of “嫲” as a female form of address and concluded that the denotative meaning of “嫲” is based on the evolution of “妈” (mother) and it is a variant form of “妈”. Bao (2016) and Jiang (2016) also studied “嫲” as a gender marker for Chinese dialect words. On the other hand, the comparison of “嫲” and related words within a certain dialect is addressed. For example, Lan (2005) compared the meaning and usage of “公” and “嫲” in Dongshan Hakka dialect in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and found that both “公” and “嫲” can be used to name animals and things with similar characteristics to genitals, but “公” can also be used to refer to male members of the family and some male things with divine power. Generally speaking, the research on “嫲” has not yet set foot on the comparison between dialect and mandarin Mandarin Chinese, which is limited to the comparison within the dialect and the discussion of the connotation of the dialect word itself. As to research methodology, studies focusing on comparative analysis is limited. In most cases, the research centers on the word “嫲” itself.

### 3 Methodology

The study combines the CCL corpus developed by the Center for Chinese Linguistics (PKU) with the official thesaurus to sort out the semantic connotations of “嫲” and “嫲” in Mandarin and Hakka. In view of the fact that there is a lack of dialect corpora and no reliable corpus of Hakka dialects at present, the study adopts the method of documentary analysis to figure out the semantic connotation of “嫲 / 嫲” in Hakka, mainly comparing and analyzing five Hakka dialect dictionaries and one comprehensive Chinese dialect dictionary.

The five Hakka dialect dictionaries include (1) Zhang Weigeng’s *Hakka Dictionary* (1995), which represents the Meixian Hakka dialect, took three years to compile, and contains 4,145 entries; (2) Meixian Dialect Dictionary (Huang, 1995), part of the *Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects* (42 volumes), covering internal variations of the Meixian dialect, phonetic notation (initials, finals, and tones), a syllabic table, main dictionary entries, and a semantic index; (3) Luo Meizhen, Lin Lifang, and Rao Changrong’s *Universal Dictionary of Hakka* (2004), which is based on the Changting dialect (from Fujian, an early Hakka settlement center) and the Meicheng dialect (from Meizhou, Guangdong Province, the modern Hakka cultural hub), containing over 1,300 commonly used words; (4) Rao Bingcai’s *Phonetic Dictionary of Hakka* (2000), compiled over 20 years starting in the 1970s and featuring around 3,500 annotated compound words and phrases; and (5) Zhang Weigeng’s *Standard Pronunciation Dictionary of Hakka Dialect* (2020), which includes nearly 5,000 Hakka words, using the original Meixian urban dialect as the standard pronunciation, annotated with both the *Meixian Dialect Pinyin Scheme* and *International Phonetic Alphabet*, giving Mandarin explanations and example sentences in Meixian Hakka accompanied by Mandarin translations for cross-reference.

The comprehensive dictionary *Large dictionary of Chinese Dialects* (Xu & Miyata, 1999) is a collaborative research achievement between Fudan University and Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, with compilation starting in 1986 and completed in 1991, spanning five years and encompassing over 200,000 entries from ancient and modern Chinese dialects, with more than 15 million characters, making it the first large-scale dialect reference work covering both historical and regional variations.

The semantic analysis of “嫲” (má) and “嫲” (má) in Mandarin Chinese draws from the CCL Modern and Classical Chinese corpora and authoritative dictionaries. A total of four dictionaries are referenced: (1) *Dictionary of Classical Chinese*; (2) *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (7th ed.); (3) *Xinhua Dictionary*; and (4) *Xinhua Comprehensive Dictionary*. The CCL corpus includes modern and contemporary Mandarin sections, while the classical

Chinese corpus spans a long period, covering 14 historical eras from the Zhou Dynasty to the Republic of China. For analytical convenience, Zhuo and Peng (2016) divided the CCL corpus into five periods: (1) Zhou-Western Han; (2) Eastern Han-Tang; (3) Five Dynasties-Ming; (4) Qing-Republic of China; and (5) Modern-Contemporary. This classification is adopted in the study.

## 4 Results & Discussion

### 4.1 Semantic Connotations of “麻” and “嫫” in Mandarin Chinese

Considering that there are only 137 items about “麻” in the Zhou-Western Han period, which is a relatively small number, the present study merges the Zhou-Western Han period with the Eastern Han period and the Tang period (Zhou-Tang), and concludes with four time periods. Meanwhile, there are only four cases of ‘嫫’ in the Ancient Corpus, focusing on the Song and Qing dynasties, and there are only 42 cases in the Modern-Contemporary corpus, all of which are contemporary. The frequency and standardized frequency distribution of “麻” and “嫫” are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Frequency and Standardized Frequency Distribution of “麻” and “嫫”

	Times	Frequency	Standardized frequency/per million characters
“má” (麻)	Zhou-Tang	1,254 (137+1,117)	6.22
	Five Dynasties-Ming	2,882	13.99
	Qing-Republic of China	7,913	39.24
	Modern-Contemporary	290,863	61.27
“mā”(嫫)	Song Dynasty	3	0.000385
	Qing Dynasty	1	0.000128
	Contemporary	42	2.36

As can be seen from Table 1, the frequency of “麻” is higher in the last two periods (Qing-Republican and Modern-Contemporary), which is about three times or more than that in the first two periods. Taking all aspects into consideration, the study determines that the number of corpus extracted from each of the first two periods is 150 pieces, and the number of corpus extracted from each of the last two periods is 450 pieces. In order to ensure the standardization and accuracy of the corpus, irrelevant terms such as neologisms, foreign words, and proper nouns were deleted, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Irrelevant examples in the CCL corpus of “麻” and “嫫”

Type	Instance
Proper Noun	① 大瑟谓之麻，小者谓之料。（Ancient Musical Instruments） ② 在贵州省沿河土家族自治县麻阳河两岸，栖息着 67 群 700 多只国家一级保护动物——黑叶猴。（River）
Misuse in oral language	① 其子如粒珠，出而为鳖者仅二，余多为蟹为宁，虾麻，虾及诸鱼族。（Incorrect form of“蛤蟆”；toad）
Surname/name	① 虎再遣将军郭泰麻秋，带着轻骑二万，倍道追辽。（Surname） ② 青鸟更不来，麻姑断书信。（Ancient Mythological Fairies） ③ 一九三四年，后田村五十多岁的军属陈客嫫，用暗号向龙岩县委报告了敌情，被敌人发觉了，她被抓到白土。（Name） ④ 像杨超、张剑珍、魏嫫的《就义诗》，瞿秋白的《赤潮曲》，刘伯坚的《带镣行》，叶挺的《囚歌》，任锐的《送儿上前线》，周文雍的《绝笔诗》，续范亭的《绝命诗》，刘绍南的《答敌人审问》、《壮烈歌》，蔡梦慰的《黑牢诗篇》等等，都是十分感人的诗篇。（Name）

The study combines the meanings in the corpus with the results of authoritative Chinese dictionaries to collate the meanings of “麻 / 嫵”. As a result, “麻” is summarized into sixteen meanings, and “嫵” contains three meanings in total as shown in Table 3. Please note that here “嫵” is the same as “嫵”, and since only “嫵” is included in the dictionary, the definitions of “嫵” are accepted in the study.

Table 3 Meaning of “麻” “嫵” in Mandarin Chinese

No.	Meaning	Instance
麻	1 Crops	养桑麻, 育六畜, 则民富。
	2 Hemp products	弘景草麻, 漏叙光荣之功。
	3 Acne scarring on the face	衣服朴洁, 而微黑多麻。
	4 Surface not smooth	这种纸, 一面光, 一面麻。
	5 With fine speckles	遂悟白衣人乃是家中老瞎麻鸡也。
	6 To make a part of your body unable to feel anything	他和强人做一路, 把蒙汗药将俺们麻翻了, 缚了手脚, 将金宝都掳去了。
	7 Feeling partial or total loss of body sensation	神魂乱, 手脚麻, 争些半霎时身亡化。
	8 Indifference	在她底已经麻木的胸内, 仿佛秋宝肥白可爱地在她身边挣动着, 她伸出两手去抱, 可是身边是春宝。
	9 Mental insensitivity	过去部分群众认为“太行山高他来不了”的轻敌麻痹思想, 以及怕蒋军来了蹂躏摧残的恐惧思想, 都已经打破了。
	10 To make the mind insensitive	他“兴义学”的结果是实际上麻痹了当时人民革命斗争的意志
	11 Messed and disorganized	欢会少, 烦恼多, 心绪乱如麻。
	12 Not working at all as it should	孟买全市皆无牛肉可食, 因该城之屠夫与牛肉贩皆为回教徒, 交通亦陷于麻痹, 因大部汽车司机亦为回教徒。
	13 Foolish	妈妈说: “那个麻东西, 丢了好几个蛋了。”
	14 Fast and quick	多和人沟通, 说话别老吭吃瘪肚的, 做事要七拉八扯, 麻溜儿、利索儿的。
	15 Extremely, very	亏麻了。
嫵	1 Elderly women	这店家老嫵装得花簇簇地, 将个盒盘盛了礼物, 双手捧着, 一径到妙观肆中来。
	2 Mother	俗呼母为嫵嫵。
	3 Grandmother	多年后, 每当拿起这张极为难得的老照片, 我都会记起阿嫵拒绝入镜的凄婉神情。当初只觉是她不喜欢拍照, 随着年龄增长, 阅历渐多, 我才方体悟阿嫵那一刻的悲欣交集。

## 4.2 Semantic Connotations of “麻” and “嫵” in Hakka

In *Universal Dictionary of Hakka* (Luo, Lin, & Rao, 2004), the explanations for “麻” and “嫵” are respectively “<verb> to lie flat or crawl down: e.g., 快~倒 (quick, lie down)” and “<suffix> used after animal nouns to form new nouns, primarily referring to female beings, though sometimes also gender-neutral objects: e.g., 鸭~ (female duck), 笠~ (bamboo hat), 勺~ (ladle), 懒尸~ (lazy woman)”. In *Hakka Dictionary* (Zhang, 1995), *Standard Pronunciation Dictionary of Hakka Dialect* (Zhang, 2020), and *Phonetic Dictionary of Hakka* (Rao, 2000), the semantic range of “麻” aligns closely with Mandarin, encompassing meanings such as hemp (plant), linen products, numbness from pressure, loss of sensation, and surface roughness.

Regarding “嫵”, the first two dictionaries echo Luo et al. (2004), defining it as “female animals”, while Rao’s work does not include “嫵” but instead lists “嫵”, meaning “wet nurse”. *Meixian Dialect Dictionary* (X. Z. Huang, 1995) provides examples like 番嫵 (foreign woman), 老嫵嫵 (prostitute), 嫵 (mistress), 生離嫵 (capricious girl), 多嫵 (coquettish girl), and 齋嫵 (female Buddhist devotee with hair), all reinforcing the gendered connotation of “嫵”. In the linguistic practices of Hakka-speaking regions, particularly Meixian, “嫵” can follow personal names, emphasizing

gender while adding an affectionate tone. *Large Dictionary of Chinese Dialects* (Xu & Miyata, 1999) offers two definitions for “嫲” in Hakka: one, as above, meaning “<adj.> female,” and another as “mother”. However, the cited example “杨梅开花打石榴，猪嫲怀胎养只牛” (from *The Muddled Tavern*)—shows that “嫲” here aligns with the “female animal” interpretation rather than functioning as a colloquial term for “mother”. Overall, “嫲” serves as a suffix denoting “female beings”.

Lan (2005) analyzes the term “半公嫲” (literally “half-male-female”) from Meixian Dialect Dictionary, suggests it sympathetically describes intersex individuals, framing it as a compassionate term. Within Meixian Hakka communicative contexts, however, “半公嫲” is for the most part a derogatory and mocking label for individuals whose appearance, behavior, or personality ambiguously crosses gender norms (e.g., effeminate men or masculine women), and its use is strongly discouraged out of courtesy.

As we can see, some researchers believe that “嫲” can refer to genderless objects, such as 勺嫲 (dipper), 笠嫲 (hat), 鲤嫲 (carp), 舌嫲 (tongue), and claim that the name comes from the Hakka people’s observation of the physical characteristics of the reproductive organs of female animals, that is, the typical characteristics of female reproductive organs are concave and can not be highlighted, like the tongue in the mouth, not as conspicuous as the nose, the dipper named after its concave middle, and carps, having large stomach regardless of the male and female, also with “嫲” suffixed (Lan, 2005). However, this explanation does not work in the case of the word “刀嫲”. Mao (1991) annotated the word “刀嫲” as “kitchen knife” in *Report From Xunwu*, and there is a line in *Red Ballad-Unite to Fight Against Them* that reads “Unite to fight against them, sharpen knives and guns”, where “刀嫲” is also understood as a kitchen knife, only that the kitchen knife is used as a weapon, thus deriving “weapon” from “刀嫲”. “刀嫲” and “勺嫲” are both kitchen utensils used by the Hakka people in their daily life, but the characters they used are different.

The above Hakka dialect dictionaries do not include the daily-life word “刀嫲” or “刀嫲”, only the Ministry of Education’s Taiwan Hakka Dictionary uses the word “刀嫲”, which refers to a large chopper used for chopping wood or bamboo, for example, “Go to the mountain to do work, remember to bring a cleaver” (去山肚工作，愛記得帶刀嫲). However, whether it is “刀嫲” or “刀嫲”, Lan’s “fertility cult” proposal cannot explain this instance. The author searched for these two words in the CCL and BCC corpora, and found that the word “刀嫲” had already appeared in the Yuan Dynasty, while “刀嫲” has no relevant examples. In modern Chinese, both words are used.

In the study, the term “刀嫲” should be taken as the standard, but before making a comparative analysis, the study must clarify the meaning of “嫲” in “刀嫲”. The special existence of “刀嫲” that makes “fertility cult” proposal discounted and less explanatory, but this explanation is still applicable to other “嫲” related Hakka words. So we have to rethink the semantics of “嫲” in “刀嫲” from other perspectives. Chao (1975) said that the Chinese language is particularly sensitive to the number of syllables, and that whether they are composing poems (including vernacular poems) or writing prose, they have to “rely on the number of syllables in order to conceive ideas”. This reflects the fact that in the Chinese linguistic environment, focusing on phonetic collocation is the norm in language use. Each syllable in the Chinese language stream is itself a rhythmic unit of roughly equal length (Shen, 2016). Accordingly, the study speculates that “嫲” in “刀嫲” may have no particular semantic function here, but rather serves as an auxiliary component of phonological harmony within the dialectal lexicon.

In general, in Hakka represented by the Meixian dialect, “嫲” and “嫲” have a total of twelve meanings, with “嫲” containing five meanings. Here again, “嫲” is the same as “嫲”. Since only “嫲” is included in the dictionary, the meanings of “嫲” are adopted in the study, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Meaning of “麻” “嫲” in Hakka

No.	Meaning	Instance
麻	1 Crouch still, crawl down	鸡嫲麻背。
	2 Crops	麻米豆粟 厝都種過。
	3 Hemp products	因为相思得到病，爷女哀（ai）面前唔敢声，若系阿哥咁大事，搭信妹子着麻衫。
	4 Feeling a partial or total loss of bodily sensation	脚麻哩，行唔得路哩。
	5 Messed and disorganized	麻烦佢哩。
	6 Fast and quick	这个妹儿做事十分麻利，十分好。
	7 Sharp-minded; sagacious	佢这个人好麻利，你哪儿骗得佢到。
嫲	1 Female	解只花猫係嫲哩。
	2 Female sexed animals, excluding humans	他家饲养了猪嫲、羊嫲、兔嫲、鸡嫲、鸭嫲和狗嫲，共六嫲。
	3 Female gender category as opposed to man, often used as an affix	佢一个妇人家同半公嫲一样。
	4 Feminine reference to inanimate objects	勺嫲蒲個殼好硬，可以做勺嫲。
	5 No real meaning, used as a phonetic collocation	刀嫲切薺菜——兩頭空。

### 4.3 Semantic Comparative Analysis of “麻” and “嫲” in Hakka & Mandarin Chinese

Based on the statistical results in the previous section, the study finds that there is a significant semantic difference in the words “麻” and “嫲” in Hakka and Mandarin, and the results of the comparative analyses are shown in Table 5. Note that the “○” represents the possession of the meaning, whereas “--” represents the lack of the meaning.

Table 5 Semantic comparative analysis of “麻 / 嫲” in Hakka and Mandarin Chinese

No.	Meaning	Hakka	Mandarin Chinese
麻	1 Crops	○	○
	2 Hemp products	○	○
	3 Acne scarring on the face	--	○
	4 Surface not smooth	--	○
	5 With fine speckles	--	○
	6 To make a part of your body unable to feel anything	--	○
	7 Feeling partial or total loss of body sensation	○	○
	8 Indifference	--	○
	9 Mental insensitivity	--	○
	10 To make the mind insensitive	--	○
	11 Messed and disorganized	○	○
	12 Not working at all as it should	--	○
	13 Foolish	--	○
	14 Fast and quick	○	○
	15 Extremely, very	--	○
	16 Crouch still, crawl down	○	--
	17 Sharp-minded; sagacious	○	--
嫲	1 Elderly women	--	○
	2 Mother	--	○
	3 Grandmother	--	○
	4 Female	○	--
	5 Female sexed animals, excluding humans	○	--



## Continued

No.	Meaning	Hakka	Mandarin Chinese
6	Female gender category as opposed to man, often used as an affix	○	--
7	Feminine reference to inanimate objects	○	--
8	No real meaning, used as a phonetic collocation	○	--

From the table, it can be seen that the common meanings of “麻” in Hakka and Mandarin are crop, hemp product, feeling a partial or total loss of bodily sensation, messed and disorganized, and fast. The meanings of “crouching down, crawling down” and “sharp-minded” are unique in Hakka. For the semantics of “嫲”, both Hakka and Mandarin have the general semantics of “female human”, but when broken down, we can see that Hakka is missing the meaning of “嫲” as an address form. Yet Hakka has the meaning of female sexed animals (excluding humans), female gender category as opposed to man (often used as an affix), feminine reference to inanimate objects, and no real meaning (used as a phonetic collocation). Overall, Mandarin Chinese has a richer semantic meaning for the word “麻”, while Hakka’s semantics for “嫲” exceeds that of Mandarin.

Regarding the semantic difference between the words “麻” and “嫲” in Mandarin and Hakka, the study suggests that there may be a deep-rooted reason behind it. Firstly, cultural background is crucial in shaping language. The semantic differences between Hakka and Mandarin are partly determined by their respective cultural development paths. Mandarin has absorbed and expanded all kinds of semantics in the course of China’s vast cultural transmission, especially in the case of the word “麻”, which not only retains the original meaning of the plant and hemp products, but also extends the hemp meaning to include sensory loss through metaphors and metonymy. The expansion process is in line with the broader adaptability of Mandarin Chinese as a national standard language. In the process of widespread application of Mandarin Chinese, it’s of need to accurately express different experience, so it is constantly enriched semantically, like in the Internet language, the meaning of “麻” has been extended to describe the degree (e.g., 麻木), which shows the semantic innovation and adaptability of Mandarin.

Comparatively speaking, due to its regional and cultural specificity, the semantic development of the Hakka language is more conservative, especially in the use of the word “嫲”. Hakka culture retains a lot of traditional gender roles, which directly affects the development of “嫲” in the lexical meaning. Compared with “嫲” in Mandarin Chinese, which mainly refers to an elderly woman, especially used as the address form for grandmother, “嫲” in Hakka is more associated with gender attributes, referring to the feminine characteristics of female organisms or even inanimate objects, which reflects the high concern for gender and femininity in Hakka culture, and this gender awareness contributes to the semantic stability of the word “嫲” in Hakka.

As for “麻” in Hakka, it retains some of the original semantics while forming unique expressions, such as a strong action “crouching down, crawling down” and “sagacious” which is contrary to the meaning of “silly” in Mandarin. The semantic difference not only reflects the uniqueness of the semantic development of Hakka but also reflects the different cognitive perspectives used by the two languages in their understanding of character traits or behaviors.

The difference in social roles and gender perception between Mandarin and Hakka may also be an important reason for the semantic difference of the word “嫲”. Mandarin is a language of the modern Han Chinese community, in which “嫲” mainly refers to the female elders in the family. It tends to more reflect the inter-generational relationship and respect in the family structure than gender attributes. In Hakka, on the other hand, due to its deep cultural recognition of gender roles, gender references in the language are very distinct. Not only does “嫲” refer to female organisms, but it is also



used as a feminine symbol for inanimate objects. In my opinion, the gender attribute of “ 嫲 ” itself is like the distinction between *femenino* and *masculino* in French and Spanish vocabularies, and its syntactic function as a suffix is like the world’s inflected languages. The meanings of “ 嫲 ” in Hakka shows that gender roles are not only limited to human society, but also extended to nature and inanimate objects, which not only reflects a more primitive and figurative mode of gender perception, but also mirrors the importance of gender roles in Hakka culture.

## 5 Conclusion

In the study, “ 麻 ” and “ 嫲 ” in Mandarin and Hakka are compared and analyzed, and it is found that there are both commonalities and significant differences in the meaning. For “ 麻 ”, Mandarin and Hakka share five semantic items: crop, hemp product, feeling partial or total loss of body sensation, messed and disorderly, and fast. Hakka is unique in the sense of “crouching down, crawling down” and “sharp-minded”. As for “ 嫲 ” in Mandarin, it is mainly used as an address form to refer to an older woman, reflecting the inter-generational relationship and respect in the family structure, while Hakka extends the scope of use of “ 嫲 ” and the use of scenarios to form the meanings of female sexed animals (excluding humans), female gender category as opposed to man (often used as an affix), feminine reference to inanimate objects, and no real meaning (used as a phonetic collocation). First three items highlight the gender-specific character.

Overall, Mandarin has a richer semantic meaning for the word “ 麻 ”, whereas Hakka has a semantic meaning for the word “ 嫲 ” that goes beyond that of Mandarin, showing a unique linguistic and cultural background.

The study reveals the differences between dialects and the national standard language (Mandarin Chinese), and finds that the semantic evolution of language is not only driven by social development, but also influenced by multiple factors such as regional culture and social cognition. The study argues that studying dialects can help us better understand the cultural connotations and historical inheritance behind the language, and provide new perspectives on the promotion of the national common language.

The limitations of the study are as follows. On the one hand, the study relies mainly on literature and corpus analyses to provide a preliminary discussion of the semantic features of Hakka dialect. The study does not deal with specific language practices and usage contexts, especially the lack of field surveys or interviews with language speakers, which limits the in-depth understanding of pragmatic semantics to a certain extent. On the other hand, this study only focuses on the analysis of the words “ 麻 ” and “ 嫲 ”, and fails to explore the semantic differences of other related words in a wider context, which may limit the comprehensive understanding of the differences between Mandarin and Hakka. Future research can further enrich and improve the understanding in this area through fieldwork and comparison of more words.

## References

- [1] Bao, S. Y. (2016). *The study of gender marker in Chinese dialect words* [Master dissertation]. Nanjing University.
- [2] Chao, Y. R. (1975). Rhythm and structure in Chinese word conceptions. *Journal of Archeology and Anthropology*, 37-38: 1-15.
- [3] Chinese Government Network. (2013, January 14). *National Hakka Cultural Ecological Protection Experimental Zone “settled” in Ganzhou* [Web page]. [https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-01/14/content\\_2311742.htm#:~:text=2013%E5%B9%B4%E6%9C%88%E6%97%A5%E5%BC%8C](https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-01/14/content_2311742.htm#:~:text=2013%E5%B9%B4%E6%9C%88%E6%97%A5%E5%BC%8C).
- [4] Dictionary Editorial Office of the Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (2016). *Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th ed.)*.

- Beijing, China: The Commercial Press.
- [5] Editorial Board of Xinhua Comprehensive Dictionary. (2012). *Xinhua Comprehensive Dictionary*. Beijing, China: The Commercial Press.
- [6] Huang, X. F. (2024). A study on the emerging degree evaluation construction “X 麻了”. *Sinogram Culture*, (9), 151-154.
- [7] Huang, X. Z. (1987). Distribution and internal similarities and differences of Hakka dialects. *Dialect*, (2), 81-96.
- [8] Huang, X. Z. (1995). *Dictionary of Meixian Dialect (1st ed.)*. Nanjing, China: Jiangsu Education Press.
- [9] Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (2020). *Xinhua Dictionary (12th ed.)*. Beijing, China: The Commercial Press.
- [10] Jiang, J. L. (2016). *The study of gender differentiation in Chinese dialect kinship terms*. [Master dissertation]. Nanjing University.
- [11] Lan, Y. Y. (2005). Linguistic and cultural interpretation of “公、嫲” in Chengdu Dongshan Hakka dialect. *Journal of Chinese Culture*, (1), 112-116.
- [12] Lexicographical Center of Commercial Press. (2014). *Dictionary of Ancient Chinese (2nd ed.)*. Beijing, China: The Commercial Press.
- [13] Luo, M. Z., Lin, L. F., & Rao, C. R. (2004). *General Dictionary of Hakka Dialects (1st ed.)*. Guangzhou, China: Sun Yat-sen University Press. p. 36.
- [14] Ma, T. T. (2015). Exploration of the configuration evidence for female addresses[niA313uAr] ( 俩娃儿 ), [nɪnr34] ( 孃儿 ) and [mAmA53] ( 嫲嫲 ) in Xiangyang dialect. *Journal of Hubei University of Arts and Science*, 36(12), 15-18.
- [15] Mao, Z. D. (1991). *Selected Works of Mao Zedong (Volume 1) (1st ed.)*. Beijing, China: People's Publishing House.
- [16] Rao, B. C. (2000). *Phonetic Dictionary of Hakka (1st ed.)*. Guangzhou, China: Guangdong People's Press.
- [17] Shen, J. X. (2017). Chinese grammar includes prosody. *Chinese Teaching in the World*, 31(1), 3-19.
- [18] Wang, Z. Y., & Cao, W. (2023). On semantic defuzzification of “Ma” and pragmatization of “Ma Le”. *Journal of Huaiyin Institute of Technology*, 32(6), 50-56.
- [19] Wen, C. Y. (2007). On the etymology of “Ma” ( 嫲 ) in Hakka dialect. *Journal of Nanchang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, (3), 143-145.
- [20] Xu, B. H., & Miyata, I. (1999a). *Large Dictionary of Chinese Dialects (Volume 4)*. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [21] Xu, B. H., & Miyata, I. (1999b). *Large Dictionary of Chinese Dialects (Volume 5)*. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [22] Zhang, W. G. (1995). *Hakka Dictionary (1st ed.)*. Guangzhou, China: Guangdong People's Press.
- [23] Zhang, W. G. (2020). *Standard Pronunciation Dictionary of Hakka Dialect (1st ed.)*. Guangzhou, China: Guangdong People's Press.
- [24] Zhuo, J-Schmidt, & Peng, X. J. (2016). The emergence of disjunction: A history of constructionalization in Chinese. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 27(1), 101-136.