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“BITTER-SWEET LOVE”:
A Cognitive Linguistic View of Sappho’s
ΕΡΟΣ ΓΛΥΚΥΠΙΚΡΟΣ (Frg. 130 Voigt)

This article offers an analysis of Sappho’s famous phrase “sweetbitter love” in light of the cognitive linguistic theory of conceptual metaphors. Metaphors drawn from physical source domains in reference to abstract experiences already occur in our earliest sources of ancient Greek literature and the synaesthetic conceptual metaphor EXPERIENCING IS TASTING is well attested in early Greek poetry. However, Sappho’s combination of two opposite sensations in reference to the ambiguous feeling of love is probably a novel coinage and so appropriate that its metaphoricity is hardly felt, something that already for Aristotle marked ideal metaphor usage.

1.

“Bitter-sweet love” is a phrase so conventional and intimately familiar to the modern audience as to be almost a platitude. It has been used, and is used, time and again in countless poems, song lyrics, movies etc. However, the first occurrence of this particular phrasing in Western literature is in an Ancient Greek two-line fragment composed by the famous Lesbian poetess Sappho (approx. 600 BCE):

Sapph. Frg. 130.1–2 Voigt (= 40 Bergk/130 L-P):
Ἔρος δηὖτέ μ’ ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον.
Once again limb-loosening Love makes me spin, the sweetbitter, irresistible creature.¹

* The idea for this paper was conceived during a postdoctoral research fellowship in group C-2: “Space and Metaphor in Language, Cognition and Texts” of the Excellence Cluster 264 TOPOI: The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations, Berlin.
¹ Passages of Sappho’s Greek text are quoted from the standard critical edition Sappho et Alcaeus. Fragmenta, ed. by Eva-Maria Voigt, Amsterdam: Polak & van Gennep, 1971, English translations are adapted from the Loeb edition Greek Lyric I: Sappho,
Because of its brevity and the lack of context, the fragment has not received the same attention and detailed study as Sappho’s longer extant fragments. Still, the fragment weaves a rich web of associations and each individual word merits closer investigation, even though the current study focuses on the compound adjective γλυκό-πικρός “sweet-bitter” (Frg. 130.2 Voigt), the metaphor for which the lines are famous. However, the metaphoricity of the phrase “bitter-sweet Eros” has been doubted on philosophical grounds and one recent treatment of the fragment has even rejected the common translation “bitter-sweet”. Thus, a re-examination and re-evaluation of the Greek term in light of current theories of metaphor are expedient.

When it comes to metaphor, research from the field of ancient studies, and especially classical philology, usually gives pride of place to the general and well-known definition of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the first thinker to reflect on metaphor from our point of view, who famously defined metaphor as the “transfer of a foreign name” (Arist. *Po. 21, 1457b6–7: μεταφορὰ δὲ ἐστὶν ὄνοματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορά). Modern theories of metaphor, among which the cognitive linguistic approach to metaphors is currently the most prolific and influential, do not substantially differ from this basic definition and...
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textual metaphors are still primarily seen as transfers of appellations, from a ‘vehicle’ to a ‘tenor’. However, cognitive linguistics does not merely remain on the level of words, but also accounts for the underlying structures and the relations between conceptual domains: thus metaphor is very generally defined as thinking and speaking of something in terms of something else or, more technically, as conceptualizing something, the ‘tenor’, belonging to one sphere of meaning (the ‘target domain’) in terms of another, unrelated concept (the ‘vehicle’ from the ‘source domain’). From the point of view of cognitive linguistics, the English adjective “bitter-sweet” in reference to love would be categorized as a synaesthetic metaphor, because it uses terminology from the concrete source domain of taste for the more abstract experience of love. In the following study I shall discuss the epithet γλυκύπικρος and examine its implications in the context of Ancient Greek literature by applying the terminology and methods of the cognitive linguistic theory of conceptual metaphors.

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6 Cf. esp. the work done in cognitive linguistics on metaphor identification cited below in note 11. The terms ‘vehicle’ (the term or phrase which is used metaphorically in context) and ‘tenor’ (“the underlying idea of principal subject which the vehicle or figure means”) were coined by Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, New York/London: Oxford University Press, 1936, pp. 96–97. This convenient terminology for the two constituents which only together form a metaphor has largely been accepted by Anglophone researchers.


2. First, the identification of the Greek adjective γλυκύπικρος, lit. “sweetbitter”, as a metaphor deserves closer examination whether it, like its common English translation “bittersweet”, needs to be treated as a metaphor. The epithet γλυκύ-πικρος is a compound consisting of two adjectives, γλυκύς “sweet” and πικρός “bitter”, which will first be examined separately regarding their metaphoricity\(^{10}\) in the context of the fragment by applying the methods devised for metaphor identification in cognitive linguistics: in short, metaphorical use of a lexical unit is determined through the difference between the basic meaning of a word and its contextual meaning, provided that the contextual sense can be understood in comparison with the basic meaning.\(^{11}\) In case of identifying metaphors in an ancient language, it is necessary to analyze the usage of the words in earlier texts and to relate it to their etymology, as far as it can be discerned. After this preliminary analysis, the combination of the two adjectives into one single compound can be interpreted.

(1) Both γλυκύς “sweet” and πικρός “bitter” are already attested in the Homeric poems, the earliest surviving Ancient Greek literary sources. The adjective γλυκός (and the variant γλυκερός, which is often used interchangeably) denotes a sensory experience and its basic meaning is “sweet”.\(^{12}\) It is

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used to describe the pleasant tastes of nectar (Il. 1.598), honey (Od. 20.69; 24.68), figs (Od. 7.116; 11.590), wine (Od. 14.194), water (Od. 12.306), milk (Od. 4.88), and food in general (Hym. Hom. 3.461). Yet in our earliest Greek sources, the adjective γλυκύς also already occurs figuratively in form of the comparison “sweeter than honey” to describe the pleasantness of speech (Il. 1.249, cf. Hes. Th. 83–84, 97; Hym. Hom. 25.5) and, probably surprisingly, the pleasant sensation of feeling wrath (Il. 18.108–109). These comparisons are particularly illuminative, because they only make sense if the primary reference of γλυκύς is indeed to the sense of taste (“pleasant like honey” would be awkward, since the pleasant feature of honey is only its taste). Furthermore, γλυκός/γλυκερός metaphorically denotes other ‘things’ and sensations which are experienced as pleasant or desirable, most often sleep and desire, but also life (Od. 5.152; cf. [Hes.] Sc. 331), returning home (Od. 22.323), light (employed metaphorically as an affectionate appellation for Telemachus in Od. 16.23; 17.41) and song (Il. 13.637; Od. 23.145; cf. Hym. Hom. 7.59). In case of γλυκός, it is obvious that the meaning “sweet” as referring to a taste sensation is primary, while the metaphorical and more abstract secondary meaning “pleasant”, or more generally “endowed with positive qualities”, can easily be understood in comparison with the basic meaning. The evidence from early Greek poetry, particularly the for-

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13 Based on the evidence from the Homeric poems, I can find no confirmation of the claim in Schlesier, “Der bittersüse Eros” (see note 2), p. 82 (obviously based on Il. 1.598, the only occurrence of the adjective referring to taste in the Iliad) that γλυκύς has a particular relation to nectar and thus immortality.

14 Cf. esp. the common formulaic collocations γλυκός ὑπόνος “sweet sleep” in Il. 1.610; 2.71; 10.4; 23.232; 24.3; 636; Od. 2.395; 4.295; 5.472; 7.289; 9.333; 10.31, 548; 12.338; 13.282; 15.7; 18.188; 199; 19.49, 511; 23.255; 342; Hym. Hom. 4.8; 5.170; 18.8 and γλυκός ἰμαρός “sweet desire” in Il. 3.139, 446; 11.89; 14.328; Od. 22.500; Hym. Hom. 4.422; 5.2, 45, 53, 143.


16 The conceptualization SWEET IS PLEASANT (Note the convention in cognitive linguistics to print conceptual metaphors – as opposed to individual linguistic metaphors – in small capitals to indicate that they do not appear as such in texts, but are deduced from individual textual metaphors.) is common and found in several independent languages, cf. Solomon Elliot Asch, “The Metaphor: A Psychological Inquiry”, in: Renato Tagiuri/Luigi Petruullo (eds.), Person Perception and Interpersonal Behavior, Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1958, pp. 86–94, here pp. 89–90. On the question of cross-cultural metaphor universality and variation cf. Zoltán Kövecses,
mulae from the Homeric poems, shows that the metaphorical use of γλυκύς is already conventional at an early time and thus the metaphoricity of this usage is very low.17

(2) The evidence for πικρός is more difficult to interpret, since it refers to different kinds of bodily experience: in Archaic poetry, the adjective is applied most often to arrows (Il. 4.118, 124, 217; 5.99, 110, 278; 8.323; 13.587, 592; 23.867; Od. 22.8; Mimn. frg. 14.8 West; also cf. Il. 1.51; 4.129: βέλος ἐχεπευκές18), but also occurs in reference to birth-pangs (Il. 11.271; cf. Hes. Frg. 403 M.-W.), tears (Od. 4.153), the smell of seals (Od. 4.406), the root that is applied to a wound in order to dull the pain (Il. 11.846), sea-water (Od. 5.322–323), and Egypt (Od. 17.448). This evidence points to the conclusion that πικρός always refers to unpleasant experiences, such as bitter taste, pungent smell, and the stinging sensation of pain.19 Studies of synaesthetic metaphors in cognitive psychology have shown that normally metaphors originate from source domains of more immediate sensory experience, such as taste, smell, or touch and are being mapped onto less immediate senses like hearing or seeing (rather than vice versa).20 Assuming the same unidirectionality of synaesthetic metaphors in Ancient Greek (which is high-

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17 The entry in LfgrE II, col. 165 s.v. γλυκύς questions whether this usage can even still be called metaphorical (“fraglich inwiefern noch Metapher”) and Stanford, Greek Metaphor (see note 9), p. 54 dismisses “words of such loose sensory application as γλυκύς, δριμύς, ὀξύς, βαρύς, ἀμβλύς, πικρός, τραχύς” on the grounds that they “seem to have lost their precise sense sphere”; however, since basic and contextual, metaphorical meaning can still be distinguished, it is more profitable to employ the terminology of cognitive linguistics and describe the metaphoricity of this metaphor as comparatively low.

18 For the association of the epithet with πικρός/πικρία cf. LfgrE II, coll. 829–830 s.v. ἔχεπευκές.

19 The evidence from etymology is also more difficult to interpret, cf. H. Frisk, Grieschisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch. Vol. II, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1970, pp. 535–536 s.v. πικρός and Beekes, Etymological Dictionary (see note 12), p. 1190 s.v. πικρός, but it also suggests unpleasant, stinging haptic sensation as the original meaning.

ly likely, since there seems to be a universal principle of human cognition involved), the primary reference of πικρός would be to experiences of unpleasant or painful physical contact and only secondarily to bitter and unpleasant taste and smell.21 Thus, the metaphorical use of πικρός in reference to asomatous unpleasant experiences, e.g. to denote ‘bitterness’, i.e. unpleasantness or harshness, of character22 is only tertiary. This metaphorical usage of πικρός – just like γλυκός – becomes conventional in Greek literature with countless examples in Pindar and the tragedians where ultimately the instances of metaphorical usage outweigh the literal applications.23

At any rate, regarding these findings from the viewpoint of human bodily experience, the meanings of γλυκός and πικρός referring to taste are more basic, while the contextual meanings of sweet for PLEASANT and bitter for UNPLEASANT in Sappho frg. 130 Voigt contrast with their basic meanings but can be understood in comparison with them. As is the case with so many other conceptual metaphors, this conceptualization is deeply rooted in childhood experience where sweet tastes are perceived as most desirable and, conversely, bitter tastes as displeasing and best to be avoided.24

However, the examination of the etymologies raises the methodological question whether πικρός in the present context of the fragment of Sappho needs to be taken as a metaphor from the source domain TOUCH, as “stinging” appears to be its original, primary meaning, or whether it is permissible to

21 Cf. Cacciari, “Crossing the Senses” (see note 9), pp. 427–428, drawing on Joseph M. Williams, “Synaesthetic Adjectives: A Possible Law of Semantic Change”, in: Language 52 (1976), pp. 461–478. Note however, that modern lexicographers and translators usually take “bitter” as the basic meaning of πικρός from which other meanings can be derived, since English language users have no problems understanding “bitter arrows”, “bitter pain” etc.
22 Cf. Theogn. 1.301–302; Aes. Eum. 151; Soph. Phil. 510; Eur. Med. 224; Men. frg. 14 PCG; Ps.-Phoc. 83; probably also Sappho Frg. 15.9 Voigt [= 15.9 L-P]. Note that in Ancient Greek ‘bitterness’ ascribed to a human being means that that person is unpleasant or bothersome to others, rather than ‘embittered.’
24 For the experiential basis of most conceptual metaphors cf. Lakoff/Johnson, Metaphors (see note 5), Johnson, Body in the Mind (see note 15), and Rohrer “Embodiment and Experientialism” (see note 15), pp. 32–33. Also cf. Meier/Robinson, “Metaphorical Representation” (see note 20), p. 240: “[C]ognitive development begins with sensorimotor experiences. Children learn to think about things that they can see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. As children age, they develop the ability to think in more abstract terms. Such abstract thoughts appear to be built on prior sensorimotor experiences.” Note that particularly the fondness for sweet food also appears to be a universal human trait, cf. Donald E. Brown, Human Universals, Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1991, p. 139.
treat it as a metaphor from the domain of taste to which it belongs already by means of metaphorical transfer. The first process of transfer of the adjective πικρός, lit. “stinging”, “sharp” from the domain touch to the domain taste is easily explicable, since its application to denote the flavor “stinging in taste” → “bitter” closes a lexical gap: there is no other suitable Greek word to describe the flavour “bitter”, so πικρός was transferred to supply the missing taste description (as a case of catachresis). Thus, when examining further metaphorical applications of πικρός to unpleasant non-physical experiences it is necessary to decide whether the adjective was likely employed deliberately as a metaphor and if yes, whether Sappho chose it because of its association with the source domain of touch or taste. While the process of transfer for γλυκύς is clear, two options are possible for πικρός:

25 Calame, *Poetics of Eros* (see note 4), p. 16 argued against the latter position and proposed the interpretation of γλυκόπικρος in Sappho frg. 130 Voigt as “the sweet-stinging one”. According to this interpretation, only γλυκύς “sweet” (= “pleasant”) would be used as a metaphor from the source domain of taste, while πικρός “stinging” would be a metaphor from the source domain of touch, since, in any case, the lyric speaker is certainly not stung or hurt physically (just like she is not literally “spun around” [δόνει] by the experience of love). Also note that the dichotomy of love as something that is sweet and stinging is apparently also not current in later literature. The interpretation of the comparison of Aphrodite/love as a bee flitting around (Eur. *Hipp*. 563) as an allusion to the ambiguous effect of the sweetness of the bee’s honey and its sting (cited by Calame, *Poetics of Eros* [see note 4], p. 6 note 4) was already rejected by William Spencer Barrett, *Euripides, Hippolytos*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 266 ad loc.


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In any case, it cannot be denied that the most basic meaning of πικρός is physical, but it is essential for our interpretation of Sappho’s “sweetbitter love” whether the poetess used it deliberately with the idea of the taste sensation “bitterness” in mind (as a metaphor involving a double transfer, option a)) or a metaphor drawn immediately from the source domain of TOUCH (option b)).

(3) The questions of deliberateness and source domain are closely related and in order to decide them and to assess Sappho’s metaphor, it is necessary to examine the grammatical form in which they occur, for Sappho did not use them independently, but fused them together in the unique compound γλυκύπικρος. The adjective γλυκύπικρος is obviously not a determinative compound in which the two adjectives modify or determine one another, but a copulative formation which merely expresses that the antecedent displays both qualities.28 Drawing on linguistic classifications of compounds, γλυκύπικρος is neither an exocentric determinative compound (also referred to as bahuvrīhi in linguistics, following traditional Sanskrit terminology) nor an endocentric

28 Note that the Greek compound γλυκύπικρος, lit. “sweetbitter”, reverses the order of the components compared to English “bittersweet”. Carson, Bittersweet Eros (see note 2), p. 3 surmises that the order might indicate a temporal sequence: “If [the] ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities chronologically.” Carson herself is skeptical that this was the meaning Sappho intended and goes on to suggest that “[t]he pleasant aspect is named first because it is less surprising” (p. 4). Even though both interpretations are certainly permissible, as general formation rules for compounds they would be rather eccentric and probably unprecedented. Instead, I would surmise that Sappho opted for γλυκύ-πικρος rather than *πικρο-γλυκυς for reason of metre (the fragment has been preserved for metrical reasons and γλυκύπικρον fits the metre, while *πικρογλυκυς would not) and euphony (just like English “sweetbitter” seems less euphonious than “bittersweet”).
determinative compound (also called *tatpurusa*), but closer to a *dvandva* formation, where the constituents could also be linked by the conjunction “and”, even though not in the strict sense, since it denotes mixture rather than mere concomitance.\(^29\) Thus, the precise relationship between the constituents γλυκός “sweet” and πικρός “bitter” could be interpreted as copulative, if the two adjectives together are taken as a description of the properties of love, or alternatively as appositional insofar as the two adjectives are taken to provide different descriptions for the same referent.

The grammatical combination and fusion of the semantical opposites makes their close association explicit\(^30\) and suggests treating πικρός and γλυκός as constituents of a common conceptual domain. Even though the fragment of Sappho offers little additional context, the compound is obviously meant to denote the ambiguity of love which can be the cause of pleasure or pain, or both at the same time, and has been traditionally understood in this way:

> Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 5.7.2 (681B): τοὺς ἐρῶντας ἐκτήκει καὶ ἀπόλλυσι μεθ’ ἡδονῆς ἀλγηδόνι μεμιγμένης, ἣν αὐτοὶ γλυκύπικρον ὀνομάζουσιν.

It (i. e. the vision of something beautiful) melts the lovers and destroys them with pleasure mixed with pain, which they themselves call ‘sweetbitter’.\(^31\)

The straightforward juxtaposition of πικρός and γλυκός immediately evokes the sphere of tasting, but their combination also creates an oxymoron, or even paradox, for normally things taste either bitter or sweet.\(^32\) Still the metaphor is easy to relate to since there is an experiential basis for dishes combining different tastes, and it is significant that the apparent paradox of the

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\(^30\) Ernst Risch, “Griechische Determinativkomposita”, in: *Indogermanische Forschungen* 59 (1944), pp. 1–61, at p. 32 calls the compound a “striking creation of this idiosyncratic poetess” (“auffällige Bildung dieser eigenwilligen Dichterin”) and suggests changing the spelling of the compound, even though it is consistently transmitted in the manuscripts as γλυκύπικρος (and listed in this form in LSJ), to γλυκό-πικρός, arguing that it is not a proper compound: “Um die sich so widersprechenden Gefühle zu charakterisieren, setzte Sappho die beiden gegensätzlichen Adjektiva nebeneinander. Von einem richtigen Kompositum darf man, glaube ich, noch nicht sprechen. Später hat man es aber sicher als Kompositum empfunden. […]”


\(^32\) Also cf. Carson, *Bittersweet Eros* (see note 2), p. 30 who describes the word as a “compound of opposites forced together at pressure”.
adjectives arises within the combination of the metaphorical vehicles rather than from any perceived incongruity between the vehicles and their referent or the context. Indeed, the oxymoron of the combination of πικρός and γλυκύς into a single compound perfectly captures the emotional turmoil expressed in the fragment. The common source domain makes it likely that the poetess deliberately chose the adjective πικρός for its perceived basic meaning as the opposite of γλυκύς rather than for its association with other unpleasant sensations, such as the stinging of arrows (particularly since the familiar depiction of Eros as an archer, whose arrows make people fall in love, only occurs later in Classical times and is a particular feature of the Hellenistic iconography of Eros). As has been discussed above, the use of the compound adjective γλυκύ-πικρός in reference to Eros/love, an emotion and a divine entity by means of ontological metaphor, must be regarded

33 On the possibility of metaphors constituting a paradox also vide Arist. Rh. III.11.6, 1412a25–27. Indeed, metaphors in general have been defined as “contradictory predications” (cf. Harald Weinrich, “Semantik der kühnen Metapher”, in: id. Sprache in Texten, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1976, pp. 295–316, here p. 308: “Die Metapher ist eine widersprüchliche Prädikation.”). However, normally the contradiction arises between the vehicle and its context (rather that within the metaphor itself, i.e. between vehicles), and is resolved because of the conventionality of most conceptual metaphors.

34 The other epithets for Eros/love in the fragment λοσιμέλης “loosening the limbs” (line 1) and ἀμάχανον “irresistable” (line 2) as well as the verb δόνει “spin around” all express the sentiment that the individuum is helplessly at the mercy of Eros/love.

35 Also noted by Schlesier, “Der bittersüße Eros” (see note 2), p. 82: “πικρός entzieht sich in der sprachlichen Überlieferung [...] der Festlegung auf eine Geschmacksempfindung. Dennoch besteht hier von vornherein ein Gegensatz zu γλυκύς.” For further instances of metaphorical use of the opposition γλυκύς/πικρός for pleasant/unpleasant in early Greek literature cf. Solon Frg. 13.5 West; Theogn. 1.301–302; 2.1353–1354; Pind. J. 7.48; Soph. Aj. 966.

36 Cf. LIIMC s.v. “Eros”. For a representation of Eros as an archer in Hellenistic literature cf. A. R. 3.278–298, where Eros uses his arrows to make Medea fall in love with Jason; the effect of his arrow is described as “sweet pain” (A. R. 3.290: γλυκερή ἀνίῃ). However, the idea of love “striking like an arrow” already occurs in Eur. Tro. 255: ἐρως ἐτόξευσ᾿ αὐτὸν ἐνθέου κόρης, albeit obviously without personification, since in this instance, the emotion of love is used with genitivus obiectivus to denote the object of affection. More detailed on the development of the image of Eros as an archer vide Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas, “The Genesis of the Arrows of Love: Diachronic Conceptual Integration in Greek Mythology”, in: American Journal of Philology 132 (2011), pp. 553–579 who suggest that love’s arrows and Eros the archer did not become fully formed until the 5th century BCE.

37 On reification or personification as ontological metaphor cf. Lakoff/Johnson, Metaphors (see note 5), pp. 26–35. From the scarce context it is not clear whether Sappho imagines the god Eros (also cf. Hes. Th. 120–122) or merely love itself as animated, a “crawling creature against which there is no cure” (ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον), “spinning around” (δόνει, cf. the similar phrasing in Frg. 47 Voigt [= 47 L-P]), i.e. affecting (a
and interpreted as a metaphor, for love has a taste only in a synaesthetic-
metaphorical sense. It is only to be expected to find metaphor in love poet-
ry, since the emotion of love is certainly an abstract and therefore difficult
concept, and cognitive metaphor theory holds that abstract thought and experi-
ence cannot function independently of more concrete modes of per-
ception and representation. The two adjectives were likely chosen by Sapp-
ho for their affiliation and reference to the common source domain of taste
and purposefully used figuratively referring to the same target domain of the
emotion of love. As an emotion, the experience of love is not only difficult
to conceptualize, but also ambiguous, which is why Sappho resorted to met-
aphorical language and opted to describe it, seemingly paradoxically, as

38 Also cf. Calame, Poetics of Eros (see note 4), pp. 19–23 on Ancient Greek “physiolo-
gies of erotic desire”: Eros/love is experienced as affecting different organs, most
often the “heart” (i. e. the seat of emotions) or the eyes, but never directly said to be
savour through the sense of taste.

39 Cf. e. g. Lakoff/Johnson, Metaphors (see note 5), pp. 77–86, Johnson, Body in the
Mind (see note 15), or Meier/Robinson, “Metaphorical Representation” (see note 20).
More specifically on emotions and metaphors cf. Zoltán Kövecses, Metaphors of An-
ger, Pride and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Structure of Concepts, Philadelphia,
Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling, Cambridge: Cambridge
Gibbs, Jr. (ed.), The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought, Cambridge:
Seeks to be Expressed. Thoughts from a Linguist’s Point of View”, in: Angelos
Chaniotis (ed.), Unveiling Emotions. Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions
in the Greek World, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012, pp. 434–468 as well as Douglas Cairns,
“Mind, Body, and Metaphor in Ancient Greek Concepts of Emotion”, in: L’Atelier du
Centre de recherches historiques 16 (2016): Histoire intellectuelle des émotions, de
l’Antiquité à nos jours.

40 For this technique cf. Semino, Metaphors in Discourse (see note 11), pp. 25–26 who
refers to this use of metaphors as “extension”: “The phenomenon traditionally known
as ‘extended’ metaphor can be seen as a particular type of cluster, where several
metaphorical expressions belonging to the same semantic field or evoking the same
source domain are used in close proximity to one another in relation to the same
topic, or to elements of the same target domain.” (p. 25).
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“bitter-sweet”, i.e., prosaically in literal language, as both pleasant and unpleasant at the same time.

3.

To set the metaphor in a broader cultural context within early Greek poetry, it is possible to adduce metaphors employing similar underlying conceptualizations. The use of both γλυκός and πικρός as the most basic versions of the conceptualizations SWEET IS PLEASANT and BITTER IS UNPLEASANT needs to be interpreted as specific-level instantiations of the superordinate synaesthetic conceptual metaphor EXPERIENCING IS TASTING, which is not confined to expressing the experience of (the emotion of) love. Since there appears to be no proper word for the taste sensation “bitter”, it is best to focus on other metaphorical uses of “sweetness” and its pleasantness. Other instantiations of this metaphorical conceptualization do not necessarily employ the word γλυκός, but several experiences are metaphorically described with compound adjectives containing μέλι “honey”, with honey chosen as the object of an implicit comparison for its sweet taste, i.e. pleasantness: the compound adjective μελι-ηδής “honey-pleasant”, which literally refers to sweet tastes41 is also employed metaphorically to describe life (II. 10.495; 17.17; Od. 11.203; cf. the variation μελί-φρων in Hym. Hom. 2.129; Sc. 428), homecoming (Od. 11.100), and sleep (Od. 19.551). Similarly, by a related synaesthetic metaphor ascribing taste to auditory sensations, a voice (Od. 12.187, also cf. Sappho Frg. 185 Voigt [= 185 L-P]) or a song (Hym. Hom. 3.519, 19.18) can be experienced as μελί-γηρυς “honey-sounding”.

Beyond the metaphorical usage of individual taste sensations, other instantiations of the general comprehensive conceptualization (PHYSICAL) EXPERIENCING IS TASTING also include the Homeric phrases employing the verb γεύομαι, lit. “(to) taste”, which refer to being stabbed or beaten as “tasting one’s spear/arrow” or “tasting one’s hands”42 with the weapons and the hands metonymically denoting the strength and violence of a warrior:

41 The sweet tastes described as μελιηδής “honesweet” are wine (Il. 6.258; 10.579; 12.320; Od. 9.208; 14.78; 16.52; 18.151, 426; Hym. Hom. 29.6), fruit (Il. 18.568; Od. 9.94; Erg. 172), wheat (Il. 10.569), and pomegranates (Hym. Hom. 2.372).

42 With the exception of Od. 17.417, the verb γεύομαι is always used in this sense in early Greek epic poetry, cf. LfrE I, col. 141 s.v. γευ(ομαι). However, on etymological grounds the basic meaning as “(to) taste” is not in question, cf. Beekes, Etymological Dictionary (see note 12), p. 269 s.v. γεύ(ομαι).
These instances appear to be formulaic and thus support the initial conclusion that the metaphorical use of taste and the conceptual metaphor (physical) experiencing is tasting are already conventional in our earliest sources of Greek literature. The bodily basis of this conceptualization and the metaphorical transfer is obvious: it is a small step from “tasting food” to “experiencing/finding out by tasting” and on to “tasting” as a way to describe physical experiences which do not involve sensations of taste, as in the Homeric instantiations. The objects of experiencing through metaphorical tasting can be both concrete or abstract as well as positive or negative. The existence of this conventional conceptual metaphor in the Homeric poems corroborates the initial assessment that Sappho’s usage of γλυκύς and πικρός is indeed metaphorical rather than merely a case of semantic stretch. Acknowledging the conceptual metaphor which Sappho chose to employ in the compound γλυκύπικρος is indispensable for the linguistic as well as the philological interpretation of the fragment.


44 Note that the conceptualization as well as the phrasing are so familiar that modern commentators usually offer no explanations of the metaphor. However, the metaphoricity of this use of γεύεσθαι is already acknowledged by the scholia, cf. e. g. Σ D ad II. 20.258: εἴρηται δὲ μεταφορικῶς.

45 The conceptual metaphor experiencing is tasting in itself is neutral without association to particular tastes: the metaphorical “tasting” may refer to pleasant, ‘sweet’ sensations and experiences, such as wreaths as a metonymy for victory (Pi. I. 1.21), songs of praise (Pi. I. 5.20), strength (Pi. P. 9.35), authority (Hdt. 4.147), or freedom (Hdt. 6.5), but can also describe ‘bitter’ experiences of pain or sorrow (Pi. N. 6.24; Soph. Tr. 1101; Eur. Alc. 1069, HF 1353).
4.

The examination of γλυκύπικρος in terms of cognitive metaphor theory as a synaesthetic metaphor revealed the conceptual structures underlying the phrase and now makes it possible to assess and appreciate Sappho’s phrase more comprehensively in the context of early Greek poetry regarding the imagery and qualities of love. The individual metaphorical usages of the adjectives γλυκύς “sweet” and πικρός “bitter” are based on the common and productive conceptual metaphor EXPERIENCING IS TASTING and both were apparently already conventional at the time Sappho wrote her poem. The association of sweetness with the pleasantness of love and desire already occurs in the Homeric poems (II. 3.139, 446; 11.89; 14.328; Od. 22.500: γλυκὺς ἤμερος46), and the sweetness of love appears to be a common motif in early Greek love poetry, as e.g. in the following fragment of the Spartan choral lyric poet Alcman (7th century BCE):

Alcm. 59a PMGF: Ἐρως μὲ δὴ ἔτει Κύπριδος Ψέκατι
γλυκὺς κατείβων καρδίαν ἰαίνει.
At the command of Kypris, sweet Eros once again
pours down and warms my heart.47

The fragment is rich in metaphorical language and also employs notions of liquidness and warmth to convey the pleasant experience and effects of love, which corroborates the general supposition of cognitive science that language referring to the abstract concepts, such as of love, is largely dependent on metaphors. Eros’ sweetness and his dripping on the poetic speaker’s heart might also evoke associations with honey, but the metaphor of sweetness is unrelated to the notion of warming the affected lover. At any rate, the metaphor of γλυκύς Ἐρως is not particularly highlighted, has only low metaphoricity, and, on the basis of the evidence from the Homeric poems (cf. esp. γλυκὺς ἤμερος), was already conventional at the time of Alcman.48

On γλυκύς ἤμερος cf. Gerrit Kloss, Untersuchungen zum Wortfeld „Verlangen/Begehren“ im frühgriechischen Epos, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994, pp. 62, 64 note 149, 98; however, Kloss never acknowledges γλυκύς ἤμερος as a metaphor and treats it as if it were a literal phrase.


Contrary to the conventional metaphor of love and desire as “sweet”, i.e. enjoyable and pleasant, the idea of love as “bitter” seems to be novel, at least there are no examples for this particular wording earlier than Sappho’s poem. However, the phrasing was likely conceived as an analogy to the familiar notion that love is “sweet”, and constitutes a form of extension of the conventional metaphorical language of love poetry. After the examination of the conceptual nature of metaphors employing the notion experiencing is tasting, the bitter aspect of love is clearly not its opposite, hate, but rather love’s potential to cause unpleasant sensations. The metaphor of love’s bitterness is obviously intended to put into words the complex emotional situation that love, which is conventionally experienced and described as a pleasant, “sweet” emotion, also has the potential to cause the person affected by it considerable distress and anguish, e.g. in case of unrequited love, separation from a loved one, or loss of one’s beloved. The two verses which are sometimes surmised to have followed immediately after the passage under discussion (Frg. 130.3–4 Voigt = 131 L-P) apparently refer to hate on the part of the loved one, obviously directed at the first person speaker of the poem who is affected by love and thus suffers from unrequited love:

Sapph. Frg. 130.3–4 Voigt (= 41 Bergk/131 L-P): Ἄτθι, σοὶ δ᾿ ἔμεθεν μὲν ἀπήχθετο φροντίσδην, ἐπὶ δ᾿ Ἀνδρομέδαν πότη.
(But?), Athis, the thought of me has grown hateful to you, and you fly off to Andromeda.

Focusing exclusively on the ‘bitter’ aspect, Sappho is reported by the rhetorician Maximus of Tyre (late 2nd century CE) to have used another compound adjective to describe love’s potential to bring pain in stronger and unambiguous terms:

49 In their analysis of poetic use of metaphors, Lakoff/Turner, Poetic Metaphor (see note 5), pp. 67–69 define extension as the introduction of new, additional mappings into an existing conceptual metaphor.
50 Thus, there is no basis for the assertion in Carson, Bittersweet Eros (see note 2), p. 4: “Its (sc. Eros’) bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate.” (p. 4). Carson goes on to examine juxtapositions of love and hate in Greek poetry (pp. 4–9), but even though this is a common motive in love poetry, this is likely not what Sappho’s metaphor means. However, later in her essay, Carson moves away from the single interpretation of the “bitterness” of love as hate, also cf. Lyn Hatherly Wilson, Sappho’s Sweeterbitter Songs. Configurations of Female and Male in Ancient Greek Lyric, London/New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 66, who, quoting Carson, refers more aptly to the “bitter enmity of rejection or unfulfilled love”, “which relate[s] graphically to the pleasurable/painful nature of love”. Thus, “bittersweet love” does not refer to a love which makes the lover ultimately feel hate, but rather to a love which also brings rather pain and anguish.
“Bitter-Sweet Love”

Frg. 172 Voigt (= 125 Bergk/172 L-P/Max. Tyr. 18.9): (sc. Σαπφώ) εἶπεν γλυκύπικρον καὶ ἀλγεσίδωρον.
Sappho called love bitter-sweet and pain-giver.

In the context of Maximus of Tyre’s *Oratio* 18, the ‘bitter’ and painful aspect of love is the end, the ‘dying’ of Eros. Unfortunately, the poem and thus the original context in which Sappho described love as ἀλγεσί-δωρος, lit. “pain-giving”, has not been passed down to us and the compound is not used elsewhere in ancient love poetry (the word occurs rarely in ancient literature and in the only other context in Opp. *II* 2.668 it refers to Ἐρις “strife”). Still, the epithet ἀλγεσίδωρος, which Maximus of Tyre significantly mentions in conjunction with γλυκύπικρος, clearly shows that Sappho saw love not only as a desirable, ‘sweet’ emotion, but also as the bringer of ‘bitter’ pain. Indeed, the ‘bitterness’ and pain caused by love often appear as a central theme in Sappho’s poems which also deal with the worries and emotional anxieties love causes (cf. esp. the longer fragments Frgg. 1, 31, 94 Voigt [= 1, 31, 94 L-P]). At the beginning of Frg. 1 Voigt, a prayer to Aphrodite, Sappho pointedly asks the goddess of love to spare her the unpleasant and painful effects of loving:

Sapph. Frg. 1.4–5 Voigt (= 1 Bergk/1 L-P): μὴ μὴ ἄσαισι μηδ᾿ ὀνίαισι δάμνα, πόνια, θῶμον, […]

*do not overpower my heart, mistress, with ache and anguish […]*

Emotional anguish is often conceptualized as physical distress and pain (cf. Frg. 1.4: ἄση “distress”, ὀνία/ἀνία “anguish”, “pain”)51 and the painful aspect of love contributed to the later image of Eros as an archer with deadly arrows.52 However, in the fragment under discussion Sappho chose to employ the metaphor of bitterness, which was conventional in early Greek epic poetry for different unpleasant, painful, or destructive sensations (in addition to the evidence from epic poetry also cf. Alc. Frg. 42.3 L-P, where πίκρον [sic!] seems to refer to the ‘bitter’ grief caused by the destruction of Troy). However, there is no evidence for simple synaesthetic metaphors explicitly describing love as “bitter” before Sappho, much less for the fusion of the

51 In case of images drawn from the conceptual domain of physical pain to describe emotional pain, such as e. g. the English conventional expressions “(to) feel a stab in the heart”, “(to) feel torn apart” etc. it would also be possible to speak of a conceptual metaphor (on this type of metaphors cf. esp. Johnson, *Body in the Mind* [see note 15]), since these expressions are not literally true, but use a bodily image for a mental/emotional state. However, it has been recognized that emotional distress can actually cause physical damage, as in the case of the so-called “broken-heart syndrome” (stress-induce cardiomyopathy).