

Form and Semantics in Chinese

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Introduction

In linguistics, recent research tends to emphasize the significance of social/cultural impact on the linguistic process. According to Birch (1989:1) "the structures - the forms - of language do not pre-exist social and cultural processes, they are not encoded in some sort of psychological imprint. The forms, and hence meanings of language are shaped and determined by institutional forces."

Kress and Hodge (1993:5) view language as a system of categories and rules based on fundamental principles and assumptions about the world. They further explain that the bond is so close between language and its social context that these principles and assumptions are not related to or determined by thought: they are thought. Such assumptions are embodied in language, learnt through language, and reinforced in language use.

The Chinese Language Changes

Since late nineteenth century, quite a few language reform movements have been carried out in China. They have played a unique role in the renewal of the modern Chinese language. To examine their historical cultural environments, it is important to have a good understanding of the modern Chinese language and its researches.

1. The First Modern Chinese Grammar

In the history of the Chinese language studies, Ma Shi Wen Tong (Ma's Pass to Language) has been regarded as the beginning of modern Chinese language study which has paved the way for a systematic research of modern Chinese grammar. Ma Jianzhong, the author of Ma's Pass to Language, who had a close relationship with the Westernisation Movement promoters, was a radical language reformer. He had a good command of Latin and French, and was well informed in western science and culture because he was among the first to go to Europe as a student from China.

After he returned to China, he strongly advocated that China should learn from the Western countries.

With the ever-tensed threat of invasion of China by the capitalists, especially facing the national crisis after the Sino-French War, Ma (Ma, 1942: Preface) realised: "Only when people are well educated and become rich, can the country become stronger." This is why he became a famous figure in the Westernisation Movement. Under the above-mentioned ideology, he mainly concerned himself with educational reform. In the preface of his *Ma's Pass to Language* (1942), he pointed out that "there are fewer Chinese children than the children in the west who can read; even fewer who can read and write. There are almost no children who can read." He was eager to reform the Chinese educational system and regarded language as a tool with which to reason and teach. In 1877, he argued that "the Western countries are stronger because they have established many public schools and as a result there are more and more talented and intellectual people." (Ma, 1978:23) Motivated by the political idea, Ma had worked on Chinese language for ten years before he accomplished the first systematic grammar of Chinese in the history of Chinese language study. In his work, he applied Latin grammatical rules systematically to Chinese.

He explained in the preface that he had only analysed and compared Chinese with a western language to find out the discrepancies and similarities and then prescribed Chinese with examples by applying the rules of the western language. He firmly believed that "if Chinese children study Chinese according to the prescribed grammar, they can acquire the language much faster than they did with the traditional interpretation and explanation of classical Chinese (Ma, 1942). Therefore the traditional analysis of classical Chinese, in the linguistic sense, was abandoned, and western linguistic system was introduced into Chinese language study.

2. The Vernacular Chinese Movement

In the 1920 - 30s along with the May Fourth Movement of opposing feudalism, the modern Chinese linguistic context was full of revolutionary atmosphere. The traditional boundary of interpretation and explanation as a sole approach to classical Chinese was questioned by the Vernacular Chinese Movement led by linguists and other intellectuals. They took vernacular Chinese as a basis for their reform of the feudal Chinese culture and system. They advocated that written Chinese should be consistent with spoken Chinese in form and a new language style should be used to express new ideas. As a result, many translation works were published in vernacular Chinese and all the formal communication media adopted vernacular Chinese which was heavily loaded with foreign words and Europeanised sentence structures. New ideas came side by side with the new language

forms. The dominant position of classical Chinese in formal communication was de-emphasised, and in its place vernacular Chinese became a sole means for formal communication in the intellectual world and the object of various linguistic studies. This marked another transitional period in the history of modern Chinese language study.

Meanwhile, the great changes of the language created great psychological confusion for the whole nation. Ordinary Chinese people could not understand the new form of the Chinese language, and their linguistic awareness did not apply to the Europeanised Chinese grammar which had already acquired a dominant position in formal communication. This mismatch sparked some heated debates among linguists at that time. In the Preface of his *Xian Dai Han Yu Yu Fa Li Lun* (Theory of Modern Chinese Grammar, 1954), Wang argued that there was a distinction between Europeanised Chinese grammar and modern Chinese grammar. The former was only a grammar for intellectuals and it was only used in written Chinese. In this regard, it was not the language of most Chinese people. Confusion occurred not only because of the cultural impacts but also because of the exclusive characteristics of the Chinese language itself. Semantically, Chinese characters possess much richer shades of meaning. However, syntactically the relation between characters is so loose that it tends to give the impression that there are no apparent rules to govern. The Chinese characters are ideographic script, each of which can attach one another freely, very much like particles in an atom.

From the Western point of view, syntactic power of Chinese sentences is so weak that syntax tends to subserve meaning. This striking property makes Chinese grammar to be so elastic that it can tolerate unreasonable grammatical coding of semantic contents. Therefore, there are favourable conditions for the Chinese language to take in a large number of foreign words and Europeanised sentence structures. Due to the influence of European languages, vernacular Chinese tends to be more logical and accurate, but at the same time, it has also lost some advantages. This has raised many difficult issues and confusions for Chinese grammarians.

In 1920's, Chen Wangdao (1921) proposed two restrictions to the Europeanisation of Chinese, "the Europeanisation of Chinese should be (1) the extension and (2) the inversion or separation of the original Chinese grammar". What he stressed here was that the characteristics of Chinese should not be ignored and the language reform must be based on the level of understanding by ordinary people. In 1930's there was a movement of promoting Pu Tong Hua (Common Chinese) led by Chen Wangdao, Shen Yanbing et al. They published papers criticising scholars who had published works in vernacular Chinese heavily loaded with Europeanised sentence structures. They urged people to write in common spoken Chinese style.

Chen (1982:321) argued that "Classical Chinese is the language used to oppose ordinary people, but spoken language is people's".

However, as time goes on, what is called vernacular Chinese heavily loaded with Europeanised sentence structures has been assimilated into spoken Chinese of ordinary people. Nowadays, many young Chinese people could not distinguish between 'typical Chinese' and Europeanised Chinese. As Halliday (1978:77) noted

Certainly it is a common reproach against speakers and writers using a newly created terminology that they tend to develop a kind of translationese; a way of meaning that is derived from English or whatever second language is the main source of innovation, rather than from the language they are using. No doubt it is easier to imitate than create in the developing language semantic configurations which incorporate in new terminological matter into existing semantic styles.

3. The Latinization Movement

In the late 19th century, some linguists launched a Latinisation Movement. They pointed out that the Chinese characters were the most difficult language form to learn in the world. They attributed this to Chinese 'backwardness'. On this basis, they advocated that Chinese should be latinised in order to progress quickly in acquiring Western culture and science. As a result, a new form of Chinese (Chinese Phonetics) was first introduced by Lu in 1892.

Although Lu adopted a different language form from Ma, they shared the same purpose, that was to modernise China. It was worth noting that they did consider Chinese characters inferior to Western alphabetical writing but they did not intend to abolish Chinese characters. What they advocated was to use Latin phonetics to assist Chinese children in language acquisition. However, in 1920's, some Chinese linguists demanded that Chinese characters should be substituted by Latin spelling form as a basic reform of Chinese. Qian Yiantong (1958:5) said:

The worst of Chinese characters is that it doesn't conform to the modern world culture. What is generally considered as western culture is the real modern culture, not the private property of the western world. Therefore, if the Chinese people don't want to isolate themselves from the world, they should adopt the world alphabetic system - Roman type alphabets.

Since then there have been seriously debates over whether the Chinese characters should be substituted by an alphabetic system.

However, one hundred years have passed since the Roman type alphabet of Chinese came into being, the state-designed Latin spelling system of Chinese known as Pinyin has been promoted for over 20 years, but the Chinese characters still exist. The arguments advanced by spelling refomists are no longer convincing because language is as much a product of evolution as we are ourselves; we did not manufacture it (Halliday, 1988:2). The backwardness of China is not caused by its language but other factors are responsible. Take Japan for example, it is considered as one of the most advanced countries in the world in terms of science and technology but the use of Chinese characters in Japanese has been greatly increased in the last three decades. It is impossible and unnecessary to abolish Chinese characters now or in the future. Halliday (1978:77) maintains, "there is no reason to expect all ideologies to be modelled on the semiotic structure of standard Average European." It is well recognised that no language is inferior or superior to other languages. Each language has its own particular attributes. There is no exception for the Chinese language.

Recently some linguists have pointed out that 3 - 6 or more syllables have to be used in order to reduce the number of words if alphabetic language is implemented. Otto Ladstatter (1984) goes even further saying that the Chinese people can analyse sentences, clauses and discourses in the same way as Westerners if alphabetic language is adopted. It is argued that the proposed fundamental change of Chinese will encounter fierce rejection as it fails to take into account the Chinese unique culture and its development. The Chinese language can change dramatically due to its elastic nature but a change from ideographic script into alphabetic one will never eventuate.

In language processing, we must decode words and sentences before we can understand their meanings, but we can understand meaning directly from Images of the Chinese characters with little or without applying phonetic media.

Some Distinctive Features of Chinese

1. Topic-prominent

Generally speaking, Chinese characters are semantically based and has its own deep-rooted cultural tradition. The semanticised Chinese characters represent well the mental characteristics of Chinese thinking. In philosophy, Chinese people pay much attention to meaning rather than form; in art,

attention is paid to the consistency of meanings rather than the consistency of forms. There is no inflection in Chinese. This is the reason why morphology and syntax are hidden from their word forms, but they are hidden in linear flow of characters in a certain order. Typologically, Chinese is topic-prominent rather than subject-prominent. E.g.

A.

huoshan(volcano); de(of) dianying(film); xiaweiyi(Hawaii);
zui(most); hao(good); pai(filming).

The film of volcano can be best filmed in Hawaii.

This construction describes the relationship between the constituents of huoshan de dianying and xiaweiyi zui hao pai. The relationship of huoshan de dianying to xiaweiyi zui hao pai is neither subject or object, nor is it subject to verb although the former is described as subject and the latter predicate in modern Chinese grammar. As a matter of fact, it is altogether another kind of relationship commonly referred to as topic and comment (Jiang, 1983:68).

B.

a- Ta(he) tou(head) teng(painful). *He has a headache.*

b- Ta(he) kou(mouth) ke(thirsty). *He is thirsty.*

C.

a- Tame(they) shui(who) ye(also) mei(not) lai(come). *None of them has come.*

b- Tamen(they) ni(you) kan(look) wo(I), wo(I) kan(look) ni(you). *They look at each other.*

These sentences, in structural framework (Chao, 1976,94) are defined as 'double nominative' which consists of 'full sentences as predicate' and example B is different from example C because the relation between the first and second nominal elements in B is that of inalienable possession which is not found in C. However, in transformational framework, these so-called 'double nominative' sentences have been analysed only in the surface structure; in the underlying structure, they are derived from possessive sentences (Qian, 1979:57).

Despite the abstract and complicated analysis, there are two points to be noted concerning this underlying structure. First, no evidence is presented

for postulating identical NP1 and NP2. Second, the possessive relation between 'he' and 'head' which is apparent in common sense can hardly be seen in this analysis. As they cannot demonstrate that the so-called 'double nominative' and 'discontinuous possessive' sentences are derived from possessive sentences (some linguists have coined 'patients' only to make the analysis more complicated). Chinese is topic-prominent compared with English which is subject-prominent typologically. It makes sense to regard the first nominal elements as topics and the second nominal elements comments rather than subjects and predicates respectively.

Another specific feature of topic-comment constructs manifested in Chinese is "zero-pronominalisation which is frequently topic controlled in that a topic is followed by a series of comments, for example,

D.

Lao Zhang 1) benlai zai nanfang chongshi jianzhu gongzuo, 2) wancheng old Zhang originally in south engage construction job, 3) complete gongzou hou, 4) qu Dalian dujia, 5) muyu zai mingmeide yangguang xia, job after, go to Dalian spend vacation, bask in bright sun under, 6) zhuotian gang fei huilai yesterday just fly back

Lao Zhang had flown in just the day before from Dalian where he had spent his vacation basking in the bright sun after the completion of the construction job that he had been engaged in the south.

From the above example we can see that Lao Zhang is the topic (as well as the subject) with six verbal phrases in succession as comments. In other words, once such a topic as Lao Zhang has been established, one can continue to comment on it several times without the necessity of repeating it. From an English speaker's perspective, the links in the Chinese discourse are obscure and fragmental. However, the coherence is mainly achieved by means of word order and the semantic relations between the verbs. On the contrary the same ideas are organised in English in terms of sequence and logic from clauses into a complex sentence by means of function words such as *where, after, that*, and inflections *had flown, had spent, had been engaged*. That is why Chen (1986:437) concludes "An English sentence looks like a tree, from the trunk (main clause) of which many branches (subordinate clause) grow. But a Chinese sentence resembles a clump of bamboo with many shoots coming out independently." Therefore, the scope of a topic in Chinese can also extend across sentence boundaries, for example,

E.

wo you yige meimei, 1) hen gao, 2) paiqiu dage hen hao

(I have a sister very tall volleyball play very well)

3) bieren dou jiao ta yundongyuan

(others all call her athlete)

I have a sister who is very tall. She plays volleyball quite well and others call her athlete.

According to Jiang (1983), the topic is "sister", that is, in the topic clause wo you yige meimei (I have a sister.), only meimei(sister) is the actual topic whereas we (I) and you (have) are topic complements attached to the topic. The initial subject has changed from wo(I) to meimei(sister) in comment 1, and then to paiqiu(volleyball) in comment 2, and finally to bieren(others) in comment 3.

2. Monosyllabic

The semanticised Chinese characters are also consistent to distinctions between phonemes. In Chinese, pronunciation is not related to its form. On the one hand, it does not depend on phonetical changes in word formation, but semantic relations of characters. On the other hand, due to the lack of a distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants, it distinguishes between words by means of variations in pitch or by means of context. Such structural characteristics naturally result in the multiplication of homonyms and homographs and the decrease of the number of characters or words. Generally, a Chinese discourse tends to be shorter or economical than that of English when the same notion is expressed. This claim is supported by the finding of Hoosain (1986:43) that the English text of bilingual publications, such as the Chinese Reader's Digest, is generally sixty to seventy percent longer than the equivalent Chinese text.

In Xiandai Hanyu Chidian(Modern Chinese Dictionary, 1990), there are 9851 characters but only about 400 monosyllables or combinations of initials(consonants) and finals(vowels) in total. Among 9851 characters, about 1400 are distinguished from others by means of four variations in pitch in oral communication. Apart from variations in pitch, each monosyllable represents 7.3 characters (or words).

3. Bipolar

Another distinctive feature is the bipolar constructions deep-rooted in Chinese. In ancient China, some philosophers already found out these characteristics, which tend to be ignored by the modern Chinese linguists. The first characteristic is the Bipolar organisation of cognition (meanings are differentiated in terms of polar opposition); secondly it is the distribution of positives and their opposites; and thirdly there is a tendency toward Parallel Polarity.

In the Chinese worldview, many objects and events tend to be structured in bipolar pairings: Yang goes with Yin, heaven with earth, the sun with the moon etc. Each of these pairings is asymmetrically empowered. Thus, despite or because of their interdependency, Yang, heaven, and sun are somehow more dominant than Yin, earth, and moon, just as ruler, husband, and elder brother traditionally prevailed over subject, wife, and younger brother.

Other more common pairings reflected in the language include taking complementary extremes to form different expressions and convey various notions, for example, duoshao(many/much-few/little), shangxia(up-down), zhuoyou(left-right), daxiao(big-small), goudi(high-low), changduan(long-short), shenqian(deep-shallow), lengnuan(cold-warm), zaowan(soon-late) etc. Mutually dependent rather than conflicting and irreconcilable these paired interactants permeate Chinese discourse, for instance,

F.

zhe(this) ben(?) shu(book) **duoshao(much-little)** qian(money)?

how much does this book cost?

G.

ta(he) **shifei(yes-no)** bu(not) fen(distinguish).

He cannot tell right from wrong.

H.

ta(he) **daxiao(big-small)** shi(is) ge(a) lingdao(leader).

He is a leader no matter whether his position is low or high.

Apart from these bipolar pairs and complementary opposites, there are other two-character paired compounds which make up many conceptual categories in literary Chinese. Owen (1985:88) explains how these paired concepts are contiguously aligned in parallel couplets. From his explanation, we also get a better glimpse of the way Chinese words and statements play against and counterbalance each other.

Each line of a parallel couplet can often be seen as the expansion of one term of a common compound. A frequent example occurs in couplets describing landscapes in Chinese shansui (mountain-water). The general category through which a poet conceives of a topic is not a unitary idea, a 'landscape', rather the category is a pair of terms, and those terms dispose themselves each into one line of the couplet.

The resulting couplet consists of one line on a 'mountain' scene set in parallel to a line on a 'water' scene. In other words, an experience or perception was often broken down into its component parts and set in parallel segments. Thus, in the following portrayal of a return journey home through the mountains, an entire experience--- the 'travel' by 'day' and 'rest' by 'night', the crossing of valley/streams and mountains, the going towards and the arrival, movement and rest--- is captured in a parallel couplet (Owen 1985:92):

sui (water) su (sleep) sui (follow) yu (fisherman) huo (fire)

shan (mountain) xing (travel) dao (arrive) zhu (bamboo) fei
(gate)

For night's lodging on waters, follow the fisherman's fires

Travel through mountains to reach your bamboo gate

Read together, they provide a sense of a completed whole. The intricately interlocked components of couplets energise each other, each taking its sense from the other, each giving the other enriched meaning. Since each word simultaneously occupies a position within a line and between the lines and so acquires a dual significance. In addition, the picturesque characters (scripture) in writing, and the unique tones and rhythms add to the beauty, which can be hardly translated into another language. In Cheng's analysis of the poet Wang Wei's description of an excursion through nature, for another example:

xing (walk) dao (reach) sui (water) qiang (exhausted) chu
(place)

zuo (sit) kan (look) yun (clouds) qi (rise) shi (moment)

Walk to where the water ends

sit watching when clouds arise

If one goes back to the word-for-word translation and reads the two lines simultaneously, one will see that in each case the combination of words in parallel construction give rise to a hidden significance. Thus 'walk-sit' signifies movement and rest; 'reach-look' signifies action and contemplation; 'water-cloud' signifies universal transformation; 'exhausted-rise' signifies death and rebirth; 'place-moment' signifies space and time. Rich in this series of signification, the two lines represent in fact the two essential dimensions of life. Chang (1983:222) reinforces the position that parallelism's force derives from a symbolic attempt to express the balance, totality, and interrelations of Dao itself, which, as she explains, is made up of numerous bipolar qualities combining in constant rhythm.

Bipolar organisation characterises linguistic constructs at all levels, from the binary distinctive features of phonemes, through the subjects and predicates and heads and modifiers of syntax to the binary semantic features of words and their formation. Linguists are also familiar with ubiquitousness of positive and negative polarity in languages.

Language is, after all, a product of the subjective and spiritual activity of the human beings. The relation between varied components of a language is not that of cause-effect but an interwoven and interactive network of complexity. Now linguists have begun to reframe their theories and to place more emphasis on culture, psychology and etc., it is the right time for Chinese linguists to reconsider their research orientations, re-evaluate their tradition in Chinese studies.

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