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Linguistic Analysis of Chinese Verb Compounds and Measure Words to Cultural Values

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Abstract

Languages derived from different families show different morphological and syntactic structures, therefore, reflect different flavors in the sense of meaning. Inflections and derivatives do more work in Western languages than is asked of them in Chinese. However, the formation of verb compounds allows Chinese to attain the enlargement of lexicon. On the contrary, measure words do more work in Chinese but there is no exact equivalent of Chinese measure words in English. In this study, the Chinese verb compounds such as verb-object compound, cause-result compound, synonymous, and reduplication to cultural values will be discussed first. Measure Words to Cultural Symbolism will be rendered next from two aspects, pictorial symbolism and the characteristics to distinguish noun homophones.

Introduction

Languages derived from different families show different morphological and syntactic structures, therefore, reflect different flavors in the sense of meaning. Inflections and derivatives do more work in Western languages than is asked of them in Chinese. However, the formation of verb compounds allows Chinese to attain the enlargement of lexicon. On the contrary, measure words do more work in Chinese but there is no exact equivalent of Chinese measure words in English. Therefore, the purpose of this paper will be focused on the formation of verb compounds and the use of measure words relating to their corresponding meanings in Chinese respectively.

Unlike the scientific languages of Indo-European family, Chinese does not share the concern for the enlargement of lexicon by various ways of inflection or adding affixed derivatives to the root, such as in English the '-ed' of 'walked' the '-er' of 'reader' (Newnham 1971). Chinese is primarily concerned with writing morphemes, not with writing sound phonetically, that is, the script is more

immediately meaningful than is the spoken syllable. Therefore, it is authentically a formal (contributing to grammar or syntax) and full (concerning with lexical meaning) system of writing. A character is always one spoken syllable. A free monosyllable may form a word in itself and always can attract other free or bound syllables to enlarge itself generating a new word form which is known as a compound (Li and Thompson 1981). For example, the active verb *dú* 'read' can be linked with a noun - either (1) a free syllable such as *sh EQ \o(-,u)* 'book' to generate a verb compound *dú sh EQ \o(-,u)* 'to read book', or (2) a bound syllable, such as *zh EQ \o(v,e)* 'people' to generate a verb compound *dú zh EQ \o(v,e)* 'reader'. They are exemplified as follows:

- (1) a free syllable, such as *sh EQ \o(-,u)* 'book' functioning as the direct object of the verb to generate a verb compound *dú sh EQ \o(-,u)* 'read book'.
- (2) a bound syllable, such as *zh EQ \o(v,e)* 'people' which does not serve as the object of the verb, to form a noun compound *dú zh EQ \o(v,e)* 'reader'.

Under this kind of synthetic construction, the great number of compounds are developed, the lexicon thus becomes vivid and is largely enriched.

Among all the measure-words, the most common ones are *g_, jian, tiáo*, which are used with hundreds of frequent nouns (Fang 1970). As to how to exploit them with the particular noun-group association is the most difficult part especially for the foreigners. For example, why is the measure-word *ba*, which is used for graspable things, is associated with keys, brushes, and combs; but not with pens, pencils, and belts? Although some of them are used by convention from generation to generation, actually there are two specific characteristics for the use of measure words.

One is that the Chinese measure-words usually have pictorial symbolism, stressing the nature, quality as well as the units of a noun. The other characteristic is to distinguish homophones for the associated nouns in common use such as *sh_n* 'mountain' and *sh_n* 'shirt' have the same sound; *sh_* 'book' and *shù* 'tree' sound almost the same in Chinese. Therefore, it would be necessary for each pair of them to take different measure-words to clarify the meaning.

Verb Compounds to Cultural Values

The verb compounds will be centered in this paper, not only because they are very common in Chinese but also many of them are built up and used in the similar way as the Western languages' categories of transitive or intransitive, separable or inseparable. Moreover, the scope of compound verbs in Chinese is restricted to the active verb-group which covers what the westerners understand by verbs. The

monosyllabic active verb can express either simple actions such as: *kàn* 'to see', *j_ao* 'to teach'; or many other verbal functions such as *bi* 'to compare' (functioning like 'more than' in English), *g_i* 'to give' (can also be the preposition 'for' such as in the sentence *b_ sh_ ná géi wo* 'hand me the book') (Li and Cheng *et al.* 1984).

Verb-Object Compound

There are four ways to generate verb compounds, namely, verb-object compound, cause-result compound, synonymous, and reduplication. The first type is verb-object compound which takes the second element a genuine object such as

xí li_n 'to wash face',

sh_o hùà 'to talk',

shàng sh_n 'to go up the hill'.

It is very important to grasp what function this second element has in context, since the total sense of the compound will depend on it. Two senses can be felt with the verb-object compound, namely, the general and the restricted. The following examples can fully represent these vital distinctions.

1. *zh_ fàn* 'to boil rice'

fàn, literally means 'rice', the effect for the compound *zh_ fàn* is in the restricted sense of preparing rice.

2. *ch_ fàn* 'to eat a meal'

fàn, has a general sense here for any kind that may form a meal, such as rice, meat, vegetables, fish, soup, or all of them together. Therefore, the compound *ch_ fàn* means 'to eat a meal' instead of 'to eat rice'.

3. *nìan sh_*, literally means 'to read book aloud', that is the typical way for the ancient Chinese to learn the classics. As a matter of fact, it has a completely generalized sense 'to study' today regardless whether the reading is done aloud or not.

When the object is particularized, the expression thus looks fully transitive. For instance,

Sh_o nài jù hùà zh_n bù róng y_.

'to say that sentence is not easy'.

The verb is *sh_o* 'say', the object is particularized to mean 'that sentence'. But when the object is unparticularized, from the English translation point, the object is preferably to be dropped, the expression only retains the simplest English verb. For example, *sh_o hùà* 'to talk'. The object *hùà* is in a general sense. Thus, the expression *sh_o hùà* means 'to talk' not 'to speak phrase'.

Cause-Result Compound

Cause-result compound takes the second element signalling some result of the action or process conveyed by the first element (verb), such as

d_pò 'to hit broken',
d_k_i 'to pull open',
g_an diào 'to turn off',
sh_u húi 'to gather return',
zhàn zhù 'to stand still'.

Synonymous Compound

Synonymous compound takes the second element a parallel verb with the first element. Both of the constituents are synonymous and can not invert nor take another element in between them. For examples,

gòu m_i 'to buy',
g_ng jí 'to attack',
x_u xí 'to rest',
fú wù 'to serve'.

Reduplication

The fourth way is by reduplication of monosyllabic volitional verb. The general semantic function of reduplicating the monosyllabic volitional verb does not emphasize the actor is doing the action twice but to signal the actor is doing something "a little bit" instead. For examples: A -> A A

1. *kàn* -> *kàn kàn* 'see see = have a look'
2. *j_ao* -> *j_ao j_ao* 'teach teach = teach a little bit'

To signal the delimitative aspect, particularly the gentle action, The morpheme *yi* 'one' may be inserted between the original monosyllabic volitional verb and its repetition without any change in meaning. For examples: A -> A + *yi* + A

1. *xi_n yi xi_n* 'think one think = think a little'
2. *xìao yi xìao* 'smile one smile = smile a little'

Verb compounds are widely used in both speech and writing. Given an appropriate verb, one can freely create new verb-object compounds, resultative compounds, parallel compounds or reduplicating forms when the issue at hand requires.

Measure Words to Cultural Symbolism

The usage of Chinese measure words is discussed in the following. There are a great number of measure-word in Chinese, but there is no exact equivalent of them in Western languages. The Chinese measure-word is usually interposed between a common numeral and a particular class of noun associated with it, has both singular and plural senses (Li and Thompson 1981). For examples,

1. *yí g_ chiu* 'one ball'

The measure-word *g_* is interposed between the numeral *yi* 'one' and the noun *chiu* 'ball'.

2. *s_n g_ chiu* 'three balls'

The same measure-word *g_* is interposed between the plural numeral *s_n* 'three' and the noun *chúu* 'ball'.

Among all the measure-words, the most common ones are *g_*, *jiàn*, *tiao*, which are used with hundreds of frequent nouns. As to how to exploit them with the particular noun-group association is the most difficult part especially for the foreigners. For example, why is the measure-word *b_*, which is used for graspable things, is associated with keys, brushes, and combs; but not with pens, pencils, and belts? Although some of them are used by convention from generation to generation, actually there are two specific characteristics for the use of measure words.

Pictorial Symbolism

One is that the Chinese measure-words usually have pictorial symbolism, stressing the nature, quality as well as the units of a noun. The following examples can well represent this concern (Newnham 1971).

1. *w_ tóu níu* 'five cows'

The measure-word *tóu* 'head' is used for *níu* 'cow'.

2. *yi sh_ang hsíe* 'a pair of shoes'

The measure-word *sh_ang* 'pair' is used for *hsíe* 'shoes', for shoes are always in pairs.

3. *shí zh_ng zhi* 'ten sheets of paper'

The measure-word *zh_ng* 'to stretch' is used for a flat-surfaced noun such as *zhi* 'paper' in this example; or other nouns such as 'picture, desk, bed'.

To Distinguish Noun Homophones

The other characteristic is to distinguish homophones for the associated nouns in common use such as *sh_n* 'mountain' and *sh_n* 'shirt' have the same sound; *sh_* 'book' and *shù* 'tree' sound almost the same in Chinese. Therefore, it would be necessary for each pair of them to take different measure-words to clarify the meaning. For instances (Li and Cheng t al. 1984).

1. *yi b_n sh_* 'a book'
2. *yi k_ shù* 'a tree'
3. *yi cùo sh_n* 'a mountain'
4. *yi jian sh_n sh_n* 'a shirt'

The measure-words usually can be reduplicated such as *gè g_*, *jiàn j_ân*. The meanings for the reduplicated measure word with or without the numeral *yi* 'one' preceding it are different. For example, *gè g_* (without the measure-word *yi* 'one' preceding it) means 'every one' not 'many', while *yí g_ g_* (with the numeral *yí* 'one' preceding it) does not mean 'one' but 'many' instead.

Conclusion

Owing to the flexible creation of verb compounds, Chinese language shows great comprehension in lexicon. The delicate use of measure words reflects the unique sense of meaning relating to the nature of beauty. Once you catch the essence of the language, you will enjoy its flexibility and the beauty of the language. Therefore, I'd like to use a Chinese couplet to share these concerns regarding to the life philosophy as the conclusion.

*Nián nián nán gùo nián nián gùo ,
chù chù wú j_a chù chù j_a .*

The reduplicated measure-words *nián nián* and *chù chù* means 'every year' and 'every place' respectively. The integrated meaning for this couplet is "It is hard to make a living every year, but we do make it every year. There is no place as home everywhere, but indeed every place is home."

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 6th international Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication: East and West, March 26-30, 1997, in Tempe, Arizona, U.S.A., sponsored by the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies.

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