Motivation in Chinese and Its Use in Pedagogy and Lexicography

Li, Dong 李冬
Massey University, NEW ZEALAND

It is a linguistic principle, emphasized by Ferdinand de Saussure, the "father of linguistics", that the relation between a word and its meaning is generally arbitrary (任意性), or conventional (约定俗成). For example, there is no reason why shù in Chinese, or "tree" in English should denote that kind of plant, or why chī should be used to refer to the action of "eating", or shūō the action of "speaking". Nor does the word lèng or rè have some inherent relationship with atmospheric conditions. This linguistic principle was most beautifully expressed by W. Shakespeare:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

Romeo and Juliet, Act II, scene 2

However linguists also recognize that in some instances there is a relationship between a word and its meaning. In such a case we say the word is motivated (有理据).

Stephen Ullman in his seminal work Semantics: an Introduction of the Science of Meaning discusses three types of motivation: phonetic, morphological and semantic. For the purpose of teaching Chinese as a foreign language the most relevant type is morphological motivation, the most important of the three. This paper confines the discussion to morphological motivation.

Morphological motivation occurs in polymorphological items -- words made up of more than one morpheme, typically compounds. A compound is by definition morphologically analysable. Its meaning is therefore motivated as its component morphemes more or less indicate or suggest its meaning. In lexicology such as a word is termed as a "transparent word". For example, the meaning of the word shúbì can be readily understood from its component parts of shù and bì; or in other words, anyone who knows the meaning of shù and bì will more or less understand what shúbì refers to. In contrast, its English equivalent "bark" is one single morpheme and cannot be morphologically analyzed. Such a word is called an "opaque word". Its meaning is totally arbitrary and lacks motivation. The more compounds a language have, the more transparent words it has, and the more motivated it is.

If we compare corresponding Chinese and English words, it is easy to see that whereas English words tend to be "opaque words", Chinese words are often morphological analyzable, motivated "transparent words". Here are more examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>手套 (hand+cover)</td>
<td>glove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>溜冰鞋 (slide+ice+shoe)</td>
<td>skate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大陆 (big+land)</td>
<td>continent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>离婚 (depart+marriage)</td>
<td>divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>独身 (single+body)</td>
<td>celebacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>果园 (fruit+garden)</td>
<td>orchard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>幸福 (luck+happy)</td>
<td>happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fact that Chinese vocabulary has a high degree of motivation has resulted from the history of its modernisation. In the morphosis from Classical Chinese (wenyawen 文言文) to Modern Chinese (baihuawen 白話文) Chinese words underwent the process of di-syllabization, which, in lexicological terms, means a large number of words became compounds, e.g. 喜→喜歡, 悲→悲傷, 虎→老虎, 廚→廚房, 身→身體. At the same time, when new words are needed to denote new artifacts or concepts, they are invariably compounds, e.g. 火车, 电话, 手机, 传真. As a result Chinese vocabulary is now predominated by compounds and is consequently highly motivated.

Furthermore, the already high degree of motivation in Chinese vocabulary is reinforced by a rather unexpected source -- the writing system. In languages like English, which use the alphabet for its written word, the 20-odd letters, a, b, c, etc. do not convey any meaning at all, as they are purely phonetic. For example, no-one could imagine any relationship between the written word "tree" and the object it denotes. On the other hand, the Chinese corresponding word 木 or 樹 does have some relation with the object it denotes, as it either originated from a picture of a tree or contains the element that suggest something to do with a tree. Just as Wang Li, one of the greatest Chinese linguists of the 20th century writes: "... 漢字是屬於表意系統的文字，字形和意義有密切的關係，分析字形有助於對本意的了解." (The Chinese character is an ideogram. Its form and meaning are intimately related. An analysis of the form is helpful to the understanding of the meaning.) Of modern Chinese characters over 80% are pictophonetic characters (形聲字), composed of a signific graph (意符) and a phonetic graph (聲符). As Wang Li points out, "意符相同的形聲字，在意義上大都和意符有關，例如以貝為意符的形聲字財貨賄資贈賞賜貸責貿賒貪費貴賤等等，都是與財物有關的字....". (The meanings of pictophonetic characters sharing the same signific graph in most cases have something to do with the meaning of the signific graph. For example, pictophonetic words having as the signific graph 貝, such as 財貨賄資贈賞賜貸責貿賒貪費貴賤 are all related to "wealth").

The extremely high degree of motivation in Chinese vocabulary is a salient feature of the language and must be taken into consideration in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Moreover this salient feature should be made full use in order to make the teaching and learning of Chinese more efficient and, indeed, more enjoyable. As early as 1988 I advocated paying more attention to characters (字) in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

A Chinese character is not only a written symbol of a syllable, but also, in most cases, represents a morpheme. In this sense, characters are building blocks of words, and they are very productive ones. For example, the character 學 may be used to form a large number of words such as 學生, 學習, 學校, 學院, 小學, 中學, 大學. A couple of thousands of characters, combined in various ways, make up tens of thousands of words. A medium-sized Chinese dictionary may contain 6,000 characters which make up 50,000 words. "Selected Works of Mao Zedong", which has over one million characters, only uses 1300 different characters. As a matter of fact knowledge of a little more than 1,000 characters will enable one to read and understand about 90% of general publications. All these data argue forcefully that she starting point of and center of emphasis in Chinese vocabulary teaching should be "characters" (字), not "words" (詞).

In teaching Chinese characters, we need first of all de-mystify them. Students should be made to see that Chinese characters are, in most cases, motivated, their composition not arbitrary. This can be done by "decomposing" characters. Just as Wang Li instructs us, "分析字形有助於對本意的了解." (An analysis of the form is helpful to the understanding of the meaning.)
Contemporary Chinese scholars analyze the components of characters into (1) signific graphs (意符), (2) phonetic graphs (音符), and (3) symbols (記號). Of the three, signific graphs are our chief concern. Some of them are characters in their own right, e.g. 人, 力, 土, 女, 石, while others are not. It should be noted that although many of signific graphs overlap with radicals (部首), signific graphs and radicals are two different concepts -- whereas a radical is a shared part of a group of characters, used in traditional lexicography, a signific graph is that part of a character that suggests its meaning. 錢乃榮 in his recent book 漢語語言學 includes a list of 120 signific graphs. They should be introduced to students gradually, with the more productive ones taught first.

Along with the teaching of characters we should teach the methods of word-formation. As is discussed earlier, compounds (polymorphological items) dominate Modern Chinese vocabulary. And compounds are all well motivated as they are formed by formed with five methods of word-formation:

- Compounding: two morphemes (characters) similar or related in meaning put together to form a word, e.g. 眼睛
- Modification: one morpheme modifies another, e.g. 外國
- Verb + object: the component morphemes have a verb+ object relation, e.g. 司機
- Verb + complement: the component morphemes have a verb+ object relation, 說明
- Suffixation: the word has a prefix or suffix, e.g. 老師, 兒子

Grammatical terms like "object" and "complement" may seem daunting, but my experience has convinced me that most adult learners can grasp the concepts without much difficulty. As these same patterns repeat themselves in phrases and sentences, an early introduction of them to students may prove beneficial for more advanced stages.

Teaching of the composition of characters and word-formation methods has an added benefit of bringing Chinese culture to the classroom. Most of our students are fascinated by the rich and lasting Chinese culture. Information about how signific graphs, most of them pictographs, compose characters, and how characters form words enriches their cultural knowledge, satisfies their curiosity, and stimulates learning.

Another pedagogical benefit is mind-numbing learning by rote can be avoided in vocabulary learning. We know that the adult mind abhors irrationality, just as nature abhors vacuum. Our adult students always want to know the whys and wherefores of whatever they are taught. When they learn how characters are composed and words are formed, they will find Chinese vocabulary so much more meaningful, intellectually interesting and easier to memorize.

Unfortunately there are not many course-books that take the teaching of characters seriously. One of those which do is "A Key to Chinese Speech and Writing" ("Methode d'Initiation a la Langue et a l'ecriture chinoises" "漢語語言文字啟蒙"), written by Joel Bellassen and Zhang Pengpeng. Instead of a conventional word-list, each lesson highlights 13-20 characters, which are treated in details. Characters are "decomposed" into components; for example, 看 is decomposed into 手+目. Students are also shown words formed by the new character and previously learned ones. Beside 看, for example, are listed 看書, 看法, 看看, 好看, 小看. Published in 1989, this course-book created sales record in France, and received extremely favourable reviews. But I am not sure how widely it is used outside France. Many teachers may still feel uncomfortable with this novel approach to the teaching of Chinese vocabulary.

In the field of lexicography the salient feature of high degree of motivation in Chinese vocabulary should also be taken into account. While traditional Chinese philology laid great stress on the composition of characters, modern Chinese dictionaries, following Western examples, usually neglect the composition of characters. In this context 中正形音義綜合大字典 compiled by 高樹藩 is an outstanding exception. It gives detailed description of the composition (形), pronunciation (音) and meaning (義) of nearly 10,000 characters. Thanks to the author's erudite scholarship, the
modern reader can learn from it the composition of these characters and how their meanings are motivated by the composition. Even before its publication in 1971 the dictionary was hailed as a towering lexicographical achievement by such an illustrious literary master as Dr Lin Yutang. Now over 30 years have passed, but, with my limited knowledge, I do not know of any other dictionary which can claim to be more authoritative than this one.

This remarkable work of scholarship is, of course, not suitable for our students who need learner's dictionaries. From late 1990s I worked on two learner's dictionaries: Beginner's Chinese Dictionary, published by Tuttle Publishing last October and Tuttle Learner's Chinese-English Dictionary to be published soon.

In Beginner's Chinese Dictionary I decompose about 1,000 most frequently used characters. For example, 孩 [子 sign + 亥 phon]

This shows 孩 is composed of 子, which is a signific graph, and 亥, which is a phonetic graph, indicating the pronunciation of hài.

The dictionary includes as an appendix a list of about 50 most productive signific graphs, in which one will find: 子, 子 = child (e.g. 孩 hái, 學 xué)

In this way I hope beginner students will learn how commonly used characters are composed and this will be helpful.

In both dictionaries the method of word-formation is shown for headwords when they are compounds, e.g. 希望 [compound 希 wish + 望 look forward to]

The rational for this practice should be clear from my previous argument and need not be repeated.

So far as I know such a treatment of characters and words is unique among learner's Chinese-English dictionaries. It will be a great joy to me if my readers will find it helpful.

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