

# The Application and Value of Etymology Knowledge in Vocabulary Teaching of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Language\*

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**Abstract**—Vocabulary is the basic element of language and plays an important role in language expression. In previous vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language process, teachers only pay attention to the pronunciation, meaning and collocation of vocabulary, but don't explain the original meaning of vocabulary. This teaching method makes students' understanding of Chinese vocabulary is not deep enough and the level of Chinese is also limited. Etymology-linking method refers to the teaching method of analyzing the source of words' meaning. Through the comparative analysis of the pronunciation and semantics of the words, the etymology-linking method links the words that have common source of meaning so as to help foreign students better understand the systematization and motivation of Chinese vocabulary. In the process of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language, the rational use of etymological knowledge can not only establish the systematization of vocabulary and expand the students' vocabulary, but also reveal the motivation of words and improve students' ability to distinguish words, so as to reduce the barriers of cross-cultural communication and achieve the teaching goal of using Chinese for good communication.

**Keywords**—*etymology; teaching Chinese to speakers of other language; vocabulary teaching; etymological linkage*

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of global economic integration, increasingly close international cooperation and exchanges, Chinese, one of the world's common languages, has attracted more and more attention. In the process of Chinese learning, vocabulary is an important content. The richer Chinese vocabulary one possesses, the smoother one's Chinese expression will be. However, in the past vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language process, many teachers only pay attention to the pronunciation, meaning and collocation of vocabulary, but don't explain the original meaning and the evolution of vocabulary. This

teaching method makes students' understanding of vocabulary is not deep enough and the level of Chinese is also limited. The study of Chinese ontology is the basis of applied research, while etymology belongs to ontological research and teaching Chinese to speakers of other language belongs to applied research. From this point, the relationship between etymology and teaching Chinese to speakers of other language is like the relationship between source and stream.

## II. THE DISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF CHINESE ETYMOLOGY

The Chinese etymology period is relatively late and its history can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. The way of explaining the meaning of words in this period mainly includes two kinds: the sound-exegesis and the meaning-exegesis. The sound-exegesis is to explain the real meaning of words by using words with the same or similar pronunciation.<sup>1</sup> The meaning-exegesis is to explain the meaning of words from the perspective of practical use. In the Han Dynasty, with the further development of exegesis, "Xingxun" which means seeking the meaning from analyzing the shape of Chinese character is used to explore the origin of words and expressions. The representative works of this period are *Shuowen Jiezi* written by Xu Shen, *ShiMing* written by Liu Xi and *Fangyan* written by Yang Xiong. Among them, *Shuowen Jiezi* is not only the foundation work of Chinese linguistics, but also the masterpiece of Chinese traditional etymology research. *Shuowen Jiezi* is mainly based on the "Xingxun" and supplemented by the sound-exegesis and the meaning-exegesis. For the first time, *Shuowen Jiezi* divides 9353 Chinese characters into 540 radicals according to the form and structure. *ShiMing* is the first book to discuss the reason why things get their names and it uses sound-exegesis to explain the meaning of words. *Fangyan* seeks the etymological relationship between words by analyzing the

\*Fund: The thesis is a periodical achievement of Young Teachers' Research Project (Project No.: 18D027) supported by fundamental research funds of China West Normal University.

<sup>1</sup> Wang Li, *The History of Chinese Linguistics*, Fudan University Press: Shanghai, China, 2006; p. 37.

change of ancient and modern pronunciation of words and the change of dialect pronunciation. After the Song Dynasty, Youwen theory was very popular and its supporters such as Wang Shengmei, Wang Anshi and others believe that the Youwen which is the phonetic component of a Chinese pictophonetic character has the function of expressing meaning in addition to expressing the pronunciation. Youwen theory uses the phonetic component of a Chinese character to express meaning in order to associate with cognate words. This theory gets rid of the subjectivity of the sound-exegesis by induction and summary. Therefore, Youwen theory is a great progress in the study of etymology.

The Qing Dynasty was the heyday of Chinese traditional hermeneutics. The most representative school in the Qing Dynasty was the school of QianJia, in which many great scholars not only paid attention to a certain field of sound, meaning and form, but also combined the three fields and made a comprehensive textual research. For example: Dai Zhen's *Liushu Yinyunbiao* proposes that the phonology and the sound depend on each other; Duan Yucai says in the preface of *Guangya Shuzheng* that the most important thing in studying Confucian classics is to understand meaning and understanding meaning can't be related to the pronunciation of words; Wang Niansun's *Guangya Shuzheng* advocates that the meaning of words are the same when their pronunciations are similar and the meaning of word should be explored through its pronunciation. The transition from traditional etymology to modern etymology was from the end of Qing Dynasty to the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. During this period, the Zhanghuang School use the principles and methods of the western etymology which make the Chinese etymology get rid of the dependence on the traditional exegesis and gradually become an independent discipline. Zhang Taiyan's writing of *Wen Shi* opens the prelude to the independence of Chinese etymology by exploring the source of words.

Since the fifties and the sixties of the 20th century, the study of Chinese etymology has made great progress. For example, Wang Li's *Dictionary of cognate words*, Ren Jifang's *Chinese etymology*, Zhang Xifeng's *the Study of Chinese Word Family*, Yin Jiming's *Research on Chinese cognate words and Chinese etymological histories* are all masterpieces in the field of etymology. They explain etymology from different angles, which make the importance of Chinese etymology in Chinese research gradually prominent. And the theoretical, scientific and systematic nature of Chinese etymology has reached an unprecedented height.

### III. THE PRESENT SITUATION AND PROBLEMS OF TEACHING CHINESE VOCABULARY TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGE

Before the 21st century, the teaching of vocabulary for Chinese as a foreign language has been in a position lower than that of grammar teaching and has not been taken seriously. It was not until the 21st century that the situation improved. A large number of scholars began to attach importance to vocabulary teaching and have made remarkable progress in teaching theory and methods. In the

aspect of vocabulary teaching theory, Shao Jing tries to use the valence theory of grammar to explain the meaning of words and guide vocabulary teaching. Chang Jingyu puts forward the network systematic teaching, based on the systematic theory of Chinese vocabulary. Based on the semantic system, Zhang Huijing proposes that more attention should be paid to the study and interpretation of the additional meaning of vocabulary culture in teaching Chinese to speakers of other language. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Chen Xianchun advocates intensive vocabulary training for foreign students should be carried out at the intermediate stage. Li Rulong puts forward the idea of taking vocabulary teaching as the center. Liu Xiaomei and other scholars combine the character-centre theory of French sinologist Bai Lesang with the teaching of Chinese vocabulary. Cao Hui provides a new view for vocabulary teaching from the perspective of text linguistics. Under the guidance of the above theories, various vocabulary teaching methods have sprung up such as morpheme teaching method, character-centre teaching method, network teaching method, context teaching method, aggregate teaching method, task-based vocabulary teaching method, input-output mode teaching method, root teaching method, translation method, collocation method, discourse connection method, comparison method, topic vocabulary checklist and so on. However, almost all of these studies study the grammatical categories of vocabulary, the collocation of words, and the color of meanings and so on from Synchronic perspective while few studies are from a diachronic perspective. General linguistics holds that the combination of sound and meaning is arbitrary and there is no necessary relationship between signifier and signified. However, the attribute of language established by the people through long social practice and the analogy of language make a certain sound express a certain concept. so the relationship between sound and meaning in the language system presents certain regularity. Based on this theory, it's commonly believed that the knowledge of Chinese etymology can be used to teach Chinese vocabulary to the speakers of other language.

### IV. THE APPLICATION OF CHINESE ETYMOLOGY ANALYSIS IN TEACHING CHINESE TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGE

As it's known to all, vocabulary is the most basic structural element in language and the amount of vocabulary directly determines the level and ability of students to use a language. Whether in the examination or in the practical application, the size of vocabulary plays a decisive supporting role in the four core skills of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the practice of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language, many researchers and teachers have found that Chinese vocabulary is the main obstacle for many second language learners. For foreign students with intermediate and advanced Chinese proficiency, the lack of vocabulary and inaccurate grasp of word meaning have restricted the improvement of their Chinese level. However, the expansion of vocabulary is a long process that needs perseverance. As a teacher, there is no way to replace the students themselves to remember words. The improvement of teaching methods can help students use

more efficient learning methods to improve their interest and confidence in vocabulary learning so as to promote the improvement of Chinese vocabulary from quantity to quality. Etymological connection is a very effective method, which can help students learn the new by reviewing the old through various phonetic and semantic connections between words. Next the essay will discuss how to use etymological analysis to teach Chinese vocabulary.

The so-called etymology-linking method refers to the teaching method of analyzing the source of word meaning in the vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language. Through the comparative analysis of the pronunciation and semantics of the word, the etymology-linking method links the words that have a common source of meaning so as to help foreign students better understand the systematization and motivation of Chinese vocabulary. For example, many students often confuse the meaning of longitude and latitude. They can't distinguish between the vertical line connecting the north and south and the horizontal line connecting the east and west. After using etymological knowledge, it's found that the three Chinese characters: "茎", "颈" and "经" are homophones as well as cognates. And then teachers can let students observe the stem shape of plants in large quantities. On this basis, students can find that the stems of most plants are upright, such as pine and cypress, sugarcane and so on. Similarly, the neck of a man is straight except for a few crooked necks. Naturally, students can understand that longitude line refers to the vertical line connecting the north and the south, while, latitude line is the horizontal line connecting the east and the west.

For example, the Chinese word "华侨" (C grade word) is generally interpreted in dictionaries and textbooks as Chinese living abroad or translated into English as overseas Chinese. However, the former explanation makes the mistake of using more difficult words to explain the simpler words. While, the latter explanation is only applicable to foreign students whose first language is English. And it is of no use to students who do not understand English. If teachers use the etymology to explain this word, the effect will be quite different. First of all, teachers can use "乔" (the phonetic element of Chinese character) to link several words with the same phonetic element, such as "侨", "桥", "骄" and "娇". And then teachers can use Shuowen Jiezi to analyze the structure and meaning of each character. The Chinese character "侨" is a phonetic character and it's interpreted as high by Shuowen Jiezi. The reason why "侨" has the meaning of high is that the phonetic element "乔" has the meaning of high. The common Chinese word "乔木" refers to the tall trees. The original meaning of "乔迁" is that birds fly away from deep valleys and move to tall trees while the extended meaning of "乔迁" is congratulations on somebody's moving or promotion. The Chinese character "桥" is also a phonetic character and it's interpreted as a structure that is easily accessible on water by Shuowen Jiezi. That is, the bridge must be above the water and has the meaning of "high". The Chinese character "骄" is also a phonetic character and it's interpreted as a horse with a height of 1.386 meters by Shuowen Jiezi. That is, the original meaning

of "骄" is a horse which is tall and strong. The Chinese character "娇" is also a phonetic character and it's interpreted as "姿" by Shuowen Jiezi. And the original meaning of "娇" is the rich young lady's beautiful posture, including the meaning of prominent family background. From the above analysis, it was inferred that the reason why the phonetic element of "侨" is "乔" is that the Chinese character "乔" has the meaning of "high". The reason why the Chinese living abroad are called "华侨" is that the traditional Chinese think that it is not easy to emigrate overseas in the era of underdeveloped transportation. The Chinese word "华侨" has the meaning of "going far away". In this way, through etymological analysis, not only the deep meaning and cultural significance of overseas Chinese are explained, but also the words such as "侨", "桥", "骄" and "娇" are linked. The etymological analysis makes the teaching of Chinese vocabulary systematic and the learning of students' vocabulary motivated.

## V. THE VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS IN TEACHING CHINESE TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGE

### A. It Is Conducive to the Establishment of Vocabulary's Systematization and the Expansion of Vocabulary

The internal basis of cognate words is their connection in meaning, and the external link is their similar pronunciation. Using the similar phonetic relations of cognates can help students memorize words. A clear understanding of a group of cognates means understanding the complete motivation and internal rules of the whole group of words, which is very conducive to the deep understanding and association of words' meaning. In the process of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language, teachers usually explain vocabulary word by word, while students memorize words one by one. This teaching method makes the vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other language trivial and boring. The introduction of the concept of cognates is of great help to the learning of target words, because it can use homologous relations to connect related morphemes. For example, linking the three homologous words: "抱" (A grade word), "保" (B grade word) and "堡" (D grade word) together to form a vocabulary network from the perspective of etymology can not only expand the scope of vocabulary learning by reviewing the words that have been learned, but also help improve students' interest in guessing words.

### B. It Is Helpful to Reveal the Motivation of Words and Improve Students' Ability to Distinguish Words

Shao Zhihong (1993) once pointed out that: "the so-called motivation of words refers to the basis for things and phenomena to get their names, indicating the relationship between the meaning of words and the naming of things or phenomena."<sup>2</sup> There are other relations between the sound and meaning of words besides the natural connections, which are the motivation of words. The motivation of word is the

<sup>2</sup> Shao Zhihong, The Fuzziness of the Motivation of Words in Cross-cultural Communication, Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1993, vol. 2, p. 20.



essential and associative thing hidden behind the word, which is the fundamental cause of word's generation, development and evolution.

Cultivating students' ability to distinguish words is an important teaching task in the teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages. The improvement of the ability to distinguish words plays a great role in assisting students to learn vocabulary. The students can directly understand and distinguish words semantically. This way makes the impression of words more specific and profound. In Chinese, there are quite a few words with similar pronunciation but different meanings, which are often confused by foreign learners. For example, the three Chinese words: "半" (A grade word), "盼" (B grade word) and "颁" (D grade word) are words with similar pronunciation and they are often mispronounced and confused by foreign learners. These three words are actually a group of cognates with implicit meaning of "separate". The Chinese word "半" is interpreted as one half of things in Shuowen Jiezi. The Chinese word "盼" is a phonetic character and it is explained as black and white eyes in Shuowen Jiezi. If teachers engaged in teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages can guide learners to use etymology to analyze and understand the original meaning of words, the probability of misuse will be greatly reduced.

#### *C. It Is Helpful to Understand the Cultural Factors Behind the Words and Reduce the Obstacles of Cross-cultural Communication*

As a communication tool, language undertakes the task of transmitting information. On the other hand, language is also a part of culture and a carrier of culture, reflecting the social background, national psychology, customs, ways of thinking and other cultural characteristics of the language. Vocabulary is one of the three elements of language that keep pace with the Times. Vocabularies contain rich cultural factors and can quickly and directly reflect the changes of social life and thinking. Therefore, during the vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages, the teaching of vocabulary's cultural connotation is an indispensable element. The vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages should adapt to the growing cultural consciousness of learners, improve learners' consciousness of integrating cultural factors into language learning, make learners pay full attention to cultural factors of language and pay enough attention to the similarities and differences between cultures. Besides, the vocabulary teaching of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages should train students to learn culture from language and acquire language from culture so as to meet their needs of effective communication in different cultural environments. By introducing the homology relation between words, teachers can not only help students understand the cultural meaning of the cognates, but also reduce the barriers in cross-cultural communication effectively.

For example, the three Chinese words: "北" (A grade word), "背" (B grade word) and "负" (C grade word) are cognates. The Chinese character "北" is a pictograph and it is interpreted as two people are opposite to each other in

Shuowen Jiezi; The Chinese character "背" is also a phonetic character and it is interpreted as back in Shuowen Jiezi; The Chinese character "背" is a associative compounds and it is explained as having something to rely on. By sorting out the homology relation among the three words, it is not difficult to understand why the ancient Chinese call the defeat "败北". The Chinese character "北" is a pictograph. In oracle-bone inscriptions, the character pattern of "北" is that two people sitting back to back. Thus, the original meaning of "北" is the meaning of "back" or "opposite". In ancient times, when the two armies fight each other, the loser always flees in the opposite direction, facing the enemy with his back, so "北" gradually adds the meaning of failure.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Etymology is a hot topic in Chinese study. How to apply the achievements of etymology research to the field of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages is a new topic for us. Using the method of etymological linkage to carry out vocabulary teaching provides the most direct evidence for the systematization and motivation of Chinese vocabulary. The method of etymological linkage is not only helpful to change the traditional boring and monotonous vocabulary teaching mode, but also can meet the needs of intermediate and advanced Chinese learners to expand vocabulary and understand Chinese culture. This teaching method is helpful to improve students' interest in learning Chinese vocabulary, so as to achieve the teaching goal of using Chinese for good communication. For teachers engaged in teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages, using the etymological linkage method to teach Chinese vocabulary means higher requirements and greater challenges. Teachers not only need rich teaching experience and flexible teaching skills, but also need profound knowledge of ancient Chinese and modern Chinese. Only in this way can they change this obscure knowledge into knowledge which students can accept and understand.

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