

# Decategorization and the Flexible Use of Adjectives in the Chinese Classics

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## ABSTRACT

**The flexible use of adjectives is an important part of the ancient Chinese parts of speech. This paper attempts to analyze and demonstrate the essence and causes of the flexible use of adjectives in ancient Chinese by using the decategorization theory in order to correctly interpret the text of Chinese classics, and then contribute to translating Chinese classics into English and spread Chinese classic culture.**

*Keywords: decategorization, flexible use of adjectives, Chinese Classics*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the Dictionary of Ancient Chinese Word-class Shift compiled by Yang Zhaowei, Kong Lingda and Zhou Guoguang, the flexible use of adjectives accounts for more than 30% of the entries. In Mencius, it takes up 45% among the phenomena of the word-class shift. Furthermore, it is an important means for ancient writers to achieve artistic effects (Duan Jun, 1989:19). For example,

(1)知否? 知否? 应是绿肥红瘦。

Zhi fou? Zhi fou? Ying shi lv fei hong shou.

Know no? Know no? Should be green fat red thin.

But don't you know, O don't you know, the red should languish and the green must grow (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

(2)a.青山横北郭。

Qing shan heng bei guo.

Green mountain horizontal north outer city.

Green mountains bar the northern sky (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

b.春风又绿江南岸。

Chun feng you lv jiang nan an.

Spring wind again green river south bank.

The vernal wind has greened the Southern shore again (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

c.登泰山而小天下。

Deng Taishan er xiao tianxia.

Mount Mountain Tai and small the world.

When standing on Mount Tai, Confucius thought the whole world small (Translated by Zhao Zhentao, Zhang Wenting & Zhou Dingzhi).

The feature of the examples is that adjectives which are underlined play the grammatical role of nouns in (1) and verbs as in (2). The researches on the flexible use of adjectives mainly focus on the syntactic and pragmatic perspective, discussing their grammatical functions (Wu Yi, 1999; Gao Yuan, 2006; Wang Wei, 2013). The paper attempts to apply the theory of decategorization to analyze and illustrate the essence and motivation of the flexible use of adjectives in ancient Chinese, so as to promote the correct interpretation of the Chinese classics and contribute to their translation in English.

## II. THE FLEXIBLE USE OF ADJECTIVES

Cognitive grammar claims language is not an autonomous system. Without reference to the cognitive processing, language cannot be described. Syntax is closely related to semantics (Langacker, 1987). The exploration of the flexible use of adjectives should be comprehensively analyzed from syntax, semantics and pragmatics, based on human cognition.

### A. Essence of the flexible use of adjectives

According to cognitive linguistics, the most basic human cognitive ability is categorization which is to establish its structure and order from the disordered facts, so that it can process and store knowledge quickly and effectively. The category attributes and functional features of language entities at the word-class level are neutral in the dictionary (before entering the discourse), which are the static description and the result of categorization. Although Croft (2003) considers the most important word classes in the human language are nouns, verbs and adjectives, which are the same with

the ancient Chinese, with the development of human understanding and the practical demands of communication, the language entity will break through the category to obtain new meanings and new functions so as to meet the expression needs when the original language system cannot meet the needs of expressing new content after the language entity enters the pragmatic process. It can be divided into two types: the basic one and the temporary one. A linguistic entity performs the different syntactic functions on the lexical and syntactic levels, which are called multifunctionality (Liu Zhengguang, 2005:21). The flexible use of adjectives means that they change their basic grammatical functions in a specific language environment and temporarily have the grammatical functions of another kind of words. Actually, the flexible use of adjectives is the embodiment of the multifunctionality.

*B. Motivation of the flexible use of adjectives: decategorization*

Langacker (1987) defines nouns as things, profiling the interrelated entities in a certain cognitive domain, which constitute a region; verbs profile the process which is a complex temporal relationship; adjectives outline the non-temporal relationship, a certain aspect of the thing's characteristics and a common understanding of the standard relationship. In all languages, no matter whether there exists the morphological change or not, the parts of speech can be transformed, which is the result of natural cognition (Zhao Yanfang, 2001:145). Decategorization is an important part of categorization. It is the most important cognitive ability of human beings and the important way of language and cognitive innovation. At the linguistic level, decategorization is defined as the process in which category members gradually lose category features under certain conditions. Language decategorization has the following characteristics: 1) semantic abstraction and generalization; 2) the disappearance of some typical features of the category (syntactic / semantic features), and the neutralization of the opposites between the categories. The disappearance of the category distributing features provides a convenient way for category members to cross their own boundaries to enter another category; 3) the expansion or transfer of discourse and information organization functions (Liu Zhengguang, 2006: 78). The flexible use of adjectives is realized under the effect of decategorization, which is explained as the following examples show.

(3) a. 绿兮衣兮，绿衣黄里。

Lv xi yi xi, lv yi huang li.

Green ah clothes ah, green clothes yellow line.

Green clothes, alas, green clothes, green surface and yellow lining (Translated by Song Deli).

b. 知否？知否？应是绿肥红瘦。

Zhi fou? Zhi fou? Ying shi lv fei hong shou.

Know no? Know no? Should be green fat red thin.

But don't you know, O don't you know, The red should languish and the green must grow (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

c. 春风又绿江南岸。

Chun feng you lv jiang nan an.

Spring wind again green river south bank.

The vernal wind has greened the Southern shore again (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

The prototypical adjectives always describe the features and act as the modifier. They are mainly used as predicates, attributives, adverbials and complements in the sentences. In (3a), lv "green" is the adjective used as an attributive in the prototypical sense. In (3b), because of the PORTERTY FOR OBJECT metonymy, the adjective is decategorized so that some typical features of the adjective disappear while it is endowed with some category features of the noun. Therefore, it is can be used as a noun to be the subject. Lv "green" in (3a) outlines the relationship between a certain characteristic of a thing and a common cognitive standard, that is, the foregrounding of the small black rectangle in "Fig. 1". When lv "green" in (3b) is used flexibly as a noun, the entity is outlined, that is, the circle part in "Fig. 1" is foregrounded. The figure and the ground are reversed in (3a) and (3b). When adjectives are used flexibly as nouns, their spatiality increases. On the premise of the semantic change, the textual function changes from the modifier to the predicate, and the syntactic function expands from the original attributive in the sentence to be the subject or the object so as to enter the subject-predicate structure or predicate-object structure.

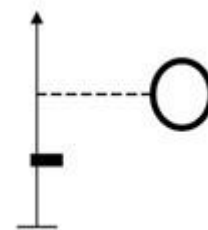


Fig. 1. Foregrounding of lv "green".

Lv "green" in (3c) is an adjective which is used flexibly as a verb to be the predicate. Because of the RESULT FOR ACTION metonymy, the adjective lv "green" is decategorized so that some typical features of the adjective disappear while it is endowed with

some category features of the verb. The adjective itself outlines the non-temporal relationship which is the result of the summary scanning shown in "Fig. 2". When it is flexibly uses as the verb, they contour the complex temporal relationship which is the result of the sequential scanning profiled by the verb in "Fig. 2".

When adjectives are used flexibly as verbs, their temporality increases. On the premise of the semantic change, the textual function changes from the modifier to the reference, and the syntactic function transfers from the modifier-head structure to the predicate-object structure.

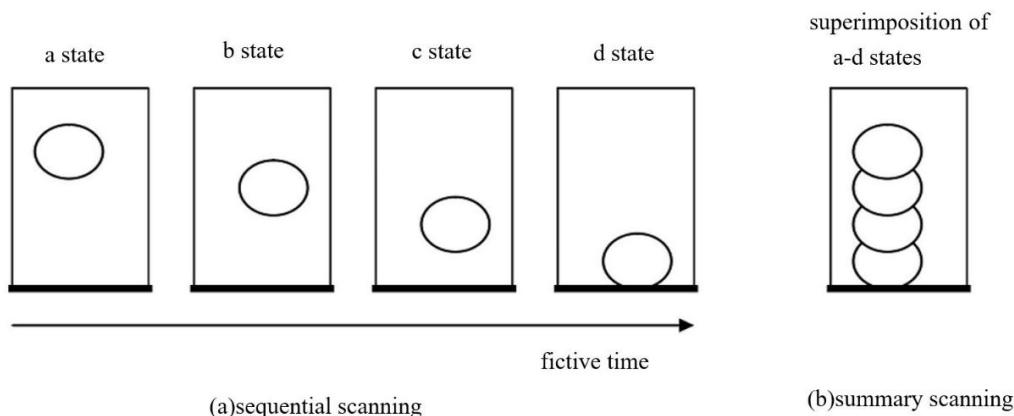


Fig. 2. Sequential vs summary scanning.

### III. THE FLEXIBLE USE OF ADJECTIVES AND THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE CLASSICS

#### A. The flexible use of adjectives as nouns

When adjectives are flexibly used as nouns, they are decategorized because of the ATTRIBUTRE FOR THING metonymy. Prototypical adjectives usually outline the relationship between things and their features. And the feature which the adjective represents is foregrounding. However, after the adjective is flexibly used as a noun, the thing which owns the feature designated by the adjective is foregrounded. Its spatiality is enhanced. Its textual functions are transferred to be the predicate. Meanwhile, its syntactic function is to act as the subject or the object in the sentence. For example,

(4) 举善而教不能，则勤。(The Analects of Confucius)

Ju shan er jiao bu neng, ze qin.

Lift kind but teacher not can, so hard-working.

a. Promote those who are worthy, train those who are incompetent; that is the best form of encouragement (Translated by Wiley).

b. If the worthy are employed and the incompetent are trained, they will be induced to be respectful and faithful (Translated by Xu Yuanchong).

Shan “kind” is originally an adjective which means good and kindhearted. In the sentence, it is used flexibly as a noun and stands for a kind of person with good morals. There are similar expressions in modern

English, namely the+adj. English is a language with morphological changes. When adjectives are used flexibly as nouns, they must be preceded by the definite article “the”, which also denotes the generic reference. As a result, the translation by Xu Yuanchong in (4a) is more suitable for the expression of the original text.

#### B. The flexible use of adjectives as verbs

When adjectives are used flexibly as verbs, they are decategorized because of the result for action metonymy. Prototypical adjectives usually outline non-temporal relationships and employ the summary scanning. However, after the adjective is flexibly used as a verb, the adjective profiles the complex temporal relation and adopts the sequential scanning. Therefore, its temporality is enhanced. Its textual functions are transferred to be the reference. Meanwhile, in its syntactic function, the grammatical structure of the adjective and the subsequent noun is no longer the predicate-object one instead of the modifier-head one. When translating Chinese classics into English, we should pay attention to these characteristics. Compare the different versions of the following example,

(5) 粉堕百花洲，香残燕子楼。(A Dream in Red Mansions)

Fen zhui bai hu zhou, xiang can yanzi lou.

Pink fall hundred flower island, perfume remnant swallow tower.

a. The pollen is spent in the Island of Flowers; From the House of the Swallow the perfume has fled (Translated by Hawkes).

b. Pinks petals fall in hundred flowers islet. By swallow tower their fragrance slowly fades (Translated by Yang Xianyi).

*Can* “remnant” is originally an adjective which means incomplete or remnant. But it is used flexibly as a verb, which not only enriches the meaning of the poem but also makes it elastic and free. Yang Xianyi uses “fall”, “fragrance” and “fade” which belongs to the rhetoric device of the alliteration to create the rhythmic beauty in the form and especially show the gradual process of the loss of the beauty revealed by *can* “remnant” in (5b). “Fled” used by Hawkes in (5a) does not exhibit such dynamic process.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the aspect of the language use, the flexible use of adjectives is the embodiment of multifunctionality. In the methodology, the flexible use of adjectives is to deliver the specific thought contents that the writer wants to express with the existing language resources. In terms of the cognitive operation, adjectives can be used to expand its original meaning by metonymy and change the category identity through category metaphor. After the adjectives are flexibly used, the meaning of the original adjectives has been transferred and expanded in the semantic, syntactic and textual functions. Only being aware of these characteristics of the flexible use of adjectives can we accurately grasp the proper meaning of the language entity used in Chinese classics and select the appropriate translation form.

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