

Diachronic Evolution and Synchronic Distribution of the Conceptual Field of Speech Act Verb Swearing Language

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ABSTRACT

Speech act verb of swearing language serves as a basic category in Chinese language, whether it is ancient or modern language, euphemism, colloquialism, or mandarin. Diachronic method and quantitative statistical analysis are employed to investigate the diachronic evolution and synchronic distribution of the conceptual field of speech act verb "swearing language". In the pre-Qin period, "詈 (Li, abusive language)" prevailed with a few combinations on and out of the field. In the Middle Chinese period, "罵 (Ma, cursing)" gradually replaced "詈" to win the dominant position, and new combination forms with elements in and out of conceptual field emerged. In the Neoteric Chinese period, "罵" occupied a dominant position with "噉 (Quan)" and "决 (Jue)" included, new combinations with elements in and out of conceptual field have been slashed. The conceptual field of speech act verb swearing language in modern Chinese language covers lots of members. "罵" is the most widely used, followed by "决" and "噉", with other members scattered in southern dialects.

Keywords: *swearing language, conceptual field, diachronic evolution, synchronic distribution*

I. INTRODUCTION

As early as 1931, German linguist J. Trier put forward the term "conceptual field". In *Outline of Ancient Chinese Lexicology* (2005), Jiang Shaoyu applied the theory to study ancient Chinese vocabularies. What's more, he employed "conceptual field" properly in *An Outline of Chinese Historical Lexicology* (2015) to analyze and solve issues involving Chinese historical lexicology. According to Li Zongjiang, "Study involving semantic field (conceptual field) should occupy a central position among studies on the evolution of common words, which is of great significance in the establishment of not only scientific Chinese lexicology, but also vocabulary teaching and theoretical system of Chinese vocabulary."¹

Swearing language, a basic category of Chinese lexicology, can be found everywhere in mandarin and dialect, whether ancient or modern. In *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (7th edition, p. 870), "罵 (cursing)" bears two meanings: (1) insulting people with rude or malicious words; (2). rebuke. The "swearing language" discussed in this paper refers to the former one. It differs from the conceptual field of "criticism"

including "责 (blame), 让, 谴 (condemn), 数 (scold), 訾 (slander), 斥 (denounce), 诋 (slander), 谤 (defame), 讪 (mock), 刺 (stab), 讥 (ridicule), 诃 (censure)", the conceptual field of "curse" covering "咒 (呪) (curse), 诅 (swear)", as well as the conceptual field of "insult" covering "谩 (deceive), 耻 (disgrace), 辱 (dishonor), 污 (smear), 嘲 (deride)". However, given the fuzzy boundary between conceptual fields, it is no easy task to make clear the members within in practice. Adjacent conceptual fields overlap and permeate each other, and the atypical members of individual conceptual fields are often distributed in different adjacent conceptual fields. Based on existing research, the author consults *Modern Dictionary of Sociology, Great Chinese Dictionary, Wang Li's Dictionary of Classic Chinese, Discrimination of Ancient Chinese, Modern Chinese Dictionary, Great Dictionary of Chinese Dialects, Comprehensive Dictionary of Regional Dialects of Modern Chinese, Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects: Lexicon* and other reference books, realizing that the conceptual field of speech act verb swearing language covers 詈 (abusive language), 罵 (cursing), 诋 (shame), 斥 (denounce), 叱 (loudly rebuke), 咒 (curse), 噉 (卷), 噉 (Jue), 决 (burst), 闹 (make a noise), 喊 (yell), 吼, 吼 (roar), 嚷 (shout), 话 (talk), 噤 (choke), 数 (scold).

¹ Li Zongjiang: *Research on the Evolution of Commonly Used Chinese Words* (Second Edition), Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, March 2016 edition, p. 74.

II. DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FIELD OF SPEECH ACT VERB SWEARING LANGUAGE

The diachronic evolution of speech act verb "swearing language" in remote ages, middle ancient period and modern Chinese is studied in this paper based on its use in historical texts.

TABLE I. THE USE OF SWEARING LANGUAGE IN THE PRE-QIN DYNASTY

| | Book of History | The Book of Songs | The Commentary of Zuo | Mozi | Xun Zi | Book of Master Zhuang | Han Feizi | Ch'u Tz'u | Strategies of the Warring States |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------|--------|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|----------------------------------|
| 詈 (abusive language) | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| 骂 (cursing) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 诟 (shame) | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 叱 (loudly rebuke) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 10 |

1) 詈 (abusive language): According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi, The Chapter of Wang Bu*, "詈, 骂也。从网从言, 网 辜人 (Li refers to abusive language.)" *Annotation to Origin of Chinese Characters* by Wang Yun writes: "詈, 见《诗》《书》, 是周语也; 骂, 见《史记》, 是汉语也 (Li, employed in *Poetry and Shu*, was the language of Zhou dynasty; while Ma, seen in *Records of the Historian*, was the language of the Han people.)" *Shi Yan Yu* records that 詈, 历也, 以恶言相称历也; 亦言离也, 以此挂离之也 (Such bad behavior often destroys the harmony of interpersonal relationship and causes disputes). In the pre-Qin documents, "詈" was employed in follows: followed by patient object that can be either a specific reference object or a generic pronoun; after modifying component to form the structure of adverbial modifier; and the construction of "见 (Jian)". While doing so, it can form a new word "詈侮 (abusive)" with adjacent conceptual field.

2) 骂 (cursing): "骂" is originally written as "罵". According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi, The Chapter of Wang Bu*, "罵, 詈也。从网马声 (罵 shares the meaning of 詈 and the pronunciation of 马). Xu Kai's *Revision of Pictophonetic Characters* reads 罵, 谓以恶言加网之也 (罵 refers to throw bad words at others). *Shi Yan Yu* records that 罵, 迫也, 以恶言被迫人也 (罵 refers to compel others with bad words). Chapter 27 of *Sound and Meaning of the Buddhist Scripture Compiled by Hui Lin* writes that 恶言及之曰骂, 诽谤诅咒曰詈 (罵 refers to throw bad words at others while 詈 refers to curse or even defame). The duo share meaning, while they are followed by "曰 (say)" to introduce curses in usage.

3) 诟 (shame): According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi, The Chapter of Yan Bu*, "诟, 讓诟, 耻也 (诟 refers to shame)". *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (second edition, Volume 7, page 4226) reveals that 诟 shares the

A. The pre-Qin period

The conceptual field of swearing language in the representative literature of the Pre-Qin Dynasty mainly includes 詈 (abusive language), 骂 (cursing), 诟 (shame), and 叱 (loudly rebuke). The usage is shown in "Table I".

meaning of scold, while is first appeared in *Original Remains of Yu Pian. Radical Yan. Great Chinese Dictionary* (Volume 11, page 183) writes that 诟 bears the meaning of abuse. *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (page 462) writes that 诟 means lash out at somebody. Unlike "詈 (abusive language)" and "骂 (cursing)", "诟 (shame)" can be followed by patient object representing things, and it is also slightly different from the two in specific meaning. According to *Discrimination of Ancient Chinese* by Wang Fengyang, "Compared with '骂 (cursing)' and '詈 (abusive language)', '诟 (shame)' is more insulting. It insults people by swearing, exposing their privateness, and so on. In modern words, it is bad-mouth. Although the first two are also insulting, they contain elements of venting or provoking the other party, and sometimes they simply reflect the rude attitude of the abusive person without any intention to humiliate the other party." ² At the same time, "诟 (shame)" is employed together with words outside the conceptual field. For example, "诟侮" meaning "insult", "诟耻", "诟房" and "诟丑" meaning disgrace.

4) 叱 (loudly rebuke): According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi, The Chapter of Kou Bu*, "叱, 诃也。从口七声 (叱 means reproach)." *Cangjie Pian*, preface of Chapter 4 of *Yiqiejing Yinyi* by Xuan Ying writes that 大河为叱 (叱 means loudly rebuke). *Discrimination of Ancient Chinese* (page 780) reads that 叱, 《说文》'诃也 (叱 is the same as 诃 in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*). However, 叱 goes further than 诃, and the former is used in rage. *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (second edition, Volume 2, page 619) reads that 叱 means loudly scold. *Great Chinese Dictionary* (Volume 3, page 57) writes 叱 bears

² Wang Fengyang. *Discrimination of Ancient Chinese*. Changchun: Jilin Literature and History Publishing House, June 1993, p.784.

in vernacular novels of Ming and Qing Dynasties. Meanwhile, no new combination involving "詈" was found.

2) 骂 (*cursing*): In the modern Chinese period, "骂" took the absolute dominant position. Its frequency was much higher than before especially in the vernacular novels of Ming and Qing Dynasties. At the same time, it combines with words in and out of the conceptual field for new compounds: 吼骂 (Shout to scold), 谪骂 (fling abuses), 啐骂 (scold), 浪骂 (scold), 嚷骂 (scold), 海骂 (vituperation), 臭骂 (curse roundly), 卷骂 (scold), 骂娘 (BS-ing), 骂喝 (scold), 骂街 (call people names in public), 骂河 (scold), 骂毁 (scold), 骂话 (scold), 骂说 (scold), 骂战 (verbal battle), 骂嚷 (scold), 骂括括 (scold), 骂鬼书 (scold), 骂山门 (scold), 骂山骂海 (scold), 骂骂咧咧 (be foul-mouthed) etc.

3) 诟 (*shame*): "Table III" reveals that 诟 appeared only once on *Farming in Nan Village* and only twice on *A Dream in Red Mansions*. It was found 47 times in the classical Chinese novel *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, mostly in terms of "诟骂" "诟辱" and "诟诅", but was barely found in any other vernacular fiction. In this period, new combination involving 诟 appeared, such as "诟詈 (*cursing*)", "疵诟 (*cursing*)", "诟忌 (*cursing*)", "诟毁 (*slander*)", "诟詈 (*cursing*)" and "诟戏 (*cursing*)".

4) 叱 (*loudly rebuke*): 叱 still only nexts to 骂 (*cursing*) in dominance. It is more common in Classical Chinese works. New terms involving 叱 include 斥叱 (berate), 訾叱 (berate), 叱斥 (berate), 叱怪 (berate), etc.

5) 卷 (*Quan*): 卷 (Quan) fails to be a member in speech act verb swearing language until modern Chinese period. It serves as dialect word in historical documents. *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (second edition, Volume 2, page 696) reads that 卷, pronouncing jué, means scolding in dialect. *Cultivating Millet Log* by Liu Qing writes that 我拍背后卷我的人还不在于少数 (I know there are many people who speak ill of me behind my back). *Great Dictionary of Chinese Dialects* (page 5432) reads that 卷 shares the meaning of scold with sarcasm. It's used in Beijing mandarin, Hebei mandarin, Shandong mandarin, Jiaoliao mandarin, Zhongyuan mandarin, and Shanxi Jin mandarin. Sometimes it is written as "卷 (Juan)", which pronounces juǎn and means scolding in dialect according to *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (second edition, Volume 1, page 346). "卷 (Juan)" first appeared in *Collection of Luxi Dialect (Continued)*: 他再卷人, 我就给他娘说, 叫他娘管教管教他 (If he curses again, I will tell his mother to discipline him). "卷 (Juan)" bears the meaning of scold, serving as the mandarin of northeast, Beijing, Hebei, Shandong, Central Plains, Shanxi, Lanyin, Jianghuai and Southwest according to *Great Dictionary of Chinese Dialects* (page 3705).

6) 诀 (*Jue*): 诀 (Jue) originally means farewell. According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi, the chapter of Yan Bu*, 诀, 死别也 (诀 refers to part forever). Later, it became a dialect in historical documents to express the meaning of "scold". *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (second edition, Volume 7, page 4209) reads that 诀 means curse in dialect. It was first mentioned in *Yun Hui Xiao Bu*: 诀, 怒河也 (诀 means fulminate). *Great Dictionary of Chinese Dialects* (page 2269) shows that "诀" refers to "scold", which is southwest mandarin. It is sometimes written as "决 (Jue)", which is collected in both *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* and *Great Chinese Dictionary*. In both dictionaries, 放牛娃儿好遭孽, 出门离不得马桑叶, 割起回去牛不吃, 又挨打来又挨决 (miserable boy herding cattle can't leave a house without a mulberry leaf. The cows don't eat the grass he cut, and he was beaten and scolded), lines from *Miserable Boy Herding Cattle*, Chinese ballad data Nanjiang folk songs in the north of Sichuan, were quoted.

Zhuang Huijie and Zhang Meilan (2019) take that different glyphs of Chinese characters should be heeded in the study involving diachronic evolution of common verbs. Characters with many glyphs should also be included in data statistics.³ Such move is necessary, given the modern Chinese literature is mostly popular works where the same Chinese character is often written in a variety of glyphs, which is more frequent in dialect. As Li Rong expressed in *Preface to Great Dictionary of Chinese Dialects*: When recording dialects with Chinese characters, some of them are written as the original character, some colloquialism, and some even homophone, with different original one and lots of colloquialism and homophone." Given the above-mentioned, Jiang Zongfu holds that 决 (Jue), 掘 (Jue), 掇 (Jue), 攫 (Jue), and 决 (Jue) share the meaning of scolding. References and historical literature reveal that "绝" "掘" "喷" "捲" and "鵲", glyphs of the same character, share the meaning "curse".

III. SYNCHRONIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FIELD OF SPEECH ACT VERB SWEARING LANGUAGE

Diachronic study of Chinese vocabulary is closely related to dialectology. Wang Weihui and Akitani Hiroyuki (2010) hold that "vocabulary is complex and varied, and generally lacks regularity. However, the evolution of basic vocabulary has a pattern to follow. The diachronic evolution and synchronic distribution of basic vocabulary correspond to each other, which can be verified and explained mutually. Therefore, the

³ Zhuang Huijie, Zhang Meilan: Current Situation and Expectation of the Research on the Diachronic Evolution of Overseas Chinese Education. Issue 3, 2019, p. 37.

combination of diachronic and synchronic is a feasible way to study Chinese vocabulary, which enjoys a broad prospect. As for the study of dialects, the historical investigation is helpful to trace dialect words, explain their synchronic distribution, and make clear the relationship between a group of synonyms. In terms of the study of lexical history, the actual distribution of dialects contributes to clarify lexical evolution and the replacement of old and new words."⁴

According to *Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects: Lexicon* edited by Cao Zhiyun, modern vernacular version of "骂 (cursing)" includes 骂 (cursing), 咒 (incantation), 咒骂 (swear), 噉 (Jue), 日噉 (scold), 闹 (make a noise), 喊 (yell), 诨, 吼 (roar), 嚷 (shout), 话 (talk), 嗔 (choke), 对桑 (scold), 数 (scold), 俞 (scold), 鸟 (scold), 断 (scold), 得 (scold), 涛 (scold), 叉 (scold), 闪 (scold), 卷 (scold), 靴 (scold), 愿 (scold), etc. The conceptual field of speech act verb swearing language in modern Chinese language covers lots of members. Among them, the dominant ones in the conceptual field are 骂 (cursing), 噉 (Jue) and 卷 (Juan). Their distribution is as follows:

"骂 (cursing)" is the most widely used, mainly distributed in north China: northeast mandarin, Beijing mandarin, Jilu mandarin (most of Hebei), Jiaoliao mandarin (mainly Liaoning), Lanyin mandarin, as well as major dialect areas in south China.

噉 (Jue) and 卷 (Juan), namely "噉" and "诀" in modern Chinese literature, are also widely distributed. The dialect atlas shows the two are mainly employed in most parts of central and western China, dividing the north-south distribution of "骂 (cursing)" in the middle.

Words like 闹 (make a noise), 喊 (yell), 诨, 吼 (roar), 嚷 (shout), 话 (talk), 嗔 (choke), 对桑 (scold), 数 (scold), 俞 (scold), 鸟 (scold), 断 (scold), 得 (scold), 涛 (scold), 叉 (scold), 闪 (scold), 靴 (scold), 愿 (scold) are scattered in the main dialect areas of southern China.

IV. CONCLUSION

Speech act verb swearing language, a basic category of the conceptual field of action, has its members continually changing through diachronic evolution. In the Middle Chinese period, "詈 (abusive language)" was edged off the top spot by "骂 (cursing)", and the combination among members also increased constantly. In the Neoteric Chinese period, the members of the conceptual field were basically stable. In the modern Chinese period, "骂 (cursing)" is absolutely dominant with abundant dialect words covered in conceptual field.

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⁴ Wang Weihui, Akitani Hiroyuki. Synchronic distribution and diachronic development of the words with the meaning 'to stand' in Chinese. *Chinese Language*, 2010, Issue 4, p. 307.