

A Corpus-driven Study on Semantic Prosody of “Tongzhi”

Lin XUe, Ying YU

University Science and Technology Beijing, China

ABSTRACT: “Tongzhi” as a social appellation is a typical Chinese usage, whose collocates patterns in different contexts reflect the alteration of its semantic prosody as a meaning unit. This paper describes the actual phenomenal use of “Tongzhi” under different pragmatic backgrounds and analyzed the semantic preference on a corpus basis.

KEYWORD: Social appellation; “Tongzhi”; Semantic prosody

1 INTRODUCTION

As the indication of culture, language symbolizes thoughts and reflects the identity of the speakers. Some language usages also determine the social recognition of speaker’s role or status.

In the historical background in Mainland area, “Tongzhi” as a social appellation has been used for nearly a century, which embodies rather different cultural meanings in different historical periods. Its use, in a considerable degree, can be regarded as the reflection of the interpersonal relationship and changes in social life. The semantic preference changes of “Tongzhi” are the product of historical changes, the epitome of social changes as well as reflection of cultural factors.

The paper focuses on the semantic prosody of “Tongzhi” in ancient and modern Mandarin as the social appellation code based on corpus-linguistic methodology. As a part of social semiotic system, social appellation code is an indicator of cultural preference and social or historical changes. Social addressing terms is a special code system, which are dynamic, systematic and flexible words commonly used in a certain cultural, national or political community. The previous study on “Tongzhi” mainly focus on the historical analysis on the meaning and cultural connotation (Hu,2000; Wang,2005; Lin,2012; Jun,2001;Yi,2005; Jiang, 2011; Pei,2007). Semantic prosody approach is adopted on this subject, thus this paper describes the actual phenomenal use of “Tongzhi” under different pragmatic backgrounds and analyzed the semantic preference on a corpus basis.

2 SEMANTIC PROSODY, THE USAGES OF “TONGZHI” AS A SOCIAL APPELLATION

2.1 *Semantic prosody*

Corpus linguistic methodology is a linguistic analytical method that uses data from language materials collected in a resource called corpus. These materials are derived from the use of the language in a variety of genres, modes, as well as oral and written materials which can be considered to describe the actual phenomenal use of the language by the language users (Gries, 2009). Through the expertise and sophistication of information technology, large linguistic data are able to be generated more quickly, and the data management is more secured and assured (in terms of methods to describe and analyze data). Corpus linguistic methodology has produced a number of approaches that can be used to examine the linguistic aspects more transparently. An example of approaches often used in the corpus linguistic methodology is the semantic prosody approach (Stubbs 1995, 1996; Partington 1998; Channell, 2000). Semantic prosody implies the existence of an intuitive meaning of an item, which is manifested only in its context. Basically, Sinclair (1996) explains the semantic prosody approach as a process to see the expressions of certain lexis which are assessed based on its existence (collaborated, adjacent, or collocated) with other lexis. Some examples of text information to be acquired is as positive or negative evaluation of the use of certain lexis and the formation of one's identity based on the frequent use of the lexis. In fact, this situation shows that each lexis that we use could be identified based on how it collaborates and collocates with other lexis

(Nygaard, Herold, & Namy, 2008). Semantic prosody resides in a particular phraseological pattern rather than a single word.

“Tongzhi” as a social appellation is a typical Chinese usage, whose phraseological patterns in different contexts reflect the alteration of its semantic prosody as the meaning unit.

2.2 *The meaning and cultural connotation of “Tongzhi” as a social appellation*

The meaning and cultural connotation of “Tongzhi” in Mandarin Chinese experienced historical changes. There have been some researches on its multi-dimensional meanings. Hu (2000) discussed the semantic and pragmatic conditions of “Tongzhi”, he believed that the semantic and pragmatic conditions of “Tongzhi” had changed with the change of society. “Tongzhi” is frequently used as the appellation of the Chinese Communist Party members in formal occasions in political languages. And in other social backgrounds, it was increasingly being replaced by other appellations, which included traditional Western appellations (such as “Sir” and “Miss”) and the professional appellations (such as “master”, “teacher”, “the boss”). This was not only the result of social economic activities development, but also a sign of social and ideological changes. Wang (2005) studied the historical evolution and semantic features of “Tongzhi”, then pointed out that “Tongzhi”, “teacher”, and “Mr.” were the main members of social appellation system. Lin (2012) explored the semantic rheological meaning of “Tongzhi”, and she came up with that the changes of appellation were closely linked with the development of social changes. “Tongzhi” has different meanings in different historical periods. The semantic changes of “Tongzhi” were not only the microcosm of social changes, but also the needs of social languages development. Wong (2003) studied the relationship between the semantic changes and ideology since the eighties of the last century in the Hong Kong area. Jun (2001) explored the evolution of “Tongzhi” and its cultural significance, he pointed out that the initial meaning of “Tongzhi” was “the person who has the same political ideas or the appellation of the same party members”; and it became one of the highly frequently used word in China at the beginning of the founding of the country. However, “Tongzhi” gradually alienated people, and “Mr.”, “boss” and “Miss” gradually became popular. “Tongzhi” was used in the 20th century within a certain range, and is widely used at the beginning of founding of PRC, then is limited to a particular scope (in some special occasions or meeting) after the Reform and Opening up. Yi (2005) discussed the evolution of “Tongzhi”. Initially, the meaning of “Tongzhi” was “friends, like-minded people”. Then it gradually

changed into “people especially who are in the same party striving for the common ideas”. After the liberation, the meaning of “Tongzhi” emphasized the common goal of the revolution. And the political color was further strengthened during the Cultural Revolution, “Tongzhi” was a kind of appellation among people, and could be used to alienate the enemy on a certain degree. But nowadays, “Tongzhi” has been reduced to a limited scope, especially formal and official occasions, such as the national conference or official newspaper and some specific institutions (such as the army). Jiang (2011) studied the “Tongzhi” and its cultural meaning. Pei (2007) investigated the evolution of “Tongzhi” in modern Chinese history. Because “zhi” was meaning of “the same ambition”, people explained “Tongzhi” as “people have the common aspirations”. With the Marx doctrine spread into China, it meant “people especially in the same party have the common political ideal”, and brought people the exciting and inspiring revolutionary ideas. After the victory of revolution, “Tongzhi” represented the equality of a common reform goal and political ideas, catering to the common pursuit of people at that time.

Most of the studies mentioned above focus on the semantic and pragmatic analysis of the single word “Tongzhi” rather than on the word with collocates as a unit of meaning. The authenticity and abundance of corpus data might enhance the depth of study in this paper. Therefore the historical meaning changes of “Tongzhi” can be described by means of semantic prosody approach.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

“Tongzhi” in ancient Chinese and modern Mandarin has different regularities in meaning. Influenced by historical, social and cultural factors, “Tongzhi” as a social appellation code embedded distinctive emotional attitudinal cue of a discourse in a particular period. The research aims at describing the distribution of collocates of “Tongzhi” in two corpuses, then analyzing the semantic prosody as well as reasons behind the meaning changes, hence the interrelationship between meaning and intention is examined. The corpus-driven methodology is adopted in this research. Firstly, The usages of “Tongzhi” as the node word in ancient Chinese and modern Mandarin are examined. 300 pieces of usage samples are selected at random from ancient Chinese and modern Mandarin respectively. The data comes from CCL (*center for Chinese Linguistics PKU*) Corpus. Semantic prosody is not explicitly but implicitly stated within the surrounding collocates. “Tongzhi” is the node word and the span is +5/-5. Then a small scale corpus is built on the basis of Renmin Web official news version and entertainment version in 2014. The social

appellation code “Tongzhi” usages are examined and the semantic prosody is analyzed based on the distribution of collocates. The statistic software is BFSUPowercon1.0.

4 SEMANTIC PROSODY ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Usages of Tongzhi in ancient Chinese

The original usage of “Tongzhi” in ancient Chinese is in the classic *Guoyu* in States War Period. “Tongzhi” means “sharing the same value, interests and having the same expectations.”

“tong de ze tong xin, tong xin ze tong zhi” (from “*Guoyu*”)

In the classic “*HuaiNanzi*” in the Western Han Dynasty, “Tongzhi” means “sharing the same political goal and following the united policies.”

“jun chen tong zhi, yu zhi shou she ji.” (from “*HuaiNanzi*”)

In “*TaiPingjing*” in the Eastern Han Dynasty, “Tongzhi” is used initially as a noun phrase referring to people who share common interests.

“fan tong zhi zhe xiang ai, yi zhi zhe xiang zeng” (from “*TaiPingjing*”)

The usages of “Tongzhi” in novels of Ming and Qing Dynasty in the CCL Corpus show an apparent nominalization trend with the meaning of “a group of people who share the same value, interests and having the same expectations” as follows. One concordance is selected every other 3 ones, then 10 out of the 30 ones are selected.

If the usages of “Tongzhi” are analyzed in a chronological order, the nominalization trend seems to be obvious. “Tongzhi” in “tong xin ze tong zhi” tends to be a verb phrase and it in “wei shang bin, cheng tong zhi”(As a superior guest, called as tongzhi) has become a typical social appellation.

According to the collocates analysis, the semantic prosody of “Tongzhi” in novels of Ming and Qing Dynasty can be classified into two types. One is noun phrase without obvious affective meaning elements. There are 26 cases in the 30 samples. The other is noun phrase with positive affective meaning elements, implying the positive connotation.

4.2 Usages of Tongzhi in modern mandarin

At the beginning of twentieth century, the Marx doctrine spread in China, and the country was in the gloomy stage of the revolutionary journey. The meaning of “Tongzhi” was “people who have the same political ideas or the called of the same party members”. It is a social appellation showing respect, hospitality or admiration.

After the victory of revolution, in the People’s Republic of China, “Tongzhi” as an appellation is utilized not only in the political and official context

but also in common life conversations. Meanwhile, “Tongzhi” replaced the feudalism and bureaucratic call (such as the master ((lǎo yé)), Mrs.(tǎ tǎ), Miss (xiao jie). As a result, it catered to the common pursuit of people and became one of the most widely accepted appellation. For example:

“Sell me two chi clothing, young comrade.”

“nian qing tong zhi, gei wo lai liang chi bu!”
(from *Corpus of Center for Chinese Linguistics PUK*)

When the Opening up Period was coming, domestic culture tended to be increasingly diversified. Some universal appellations were active such as “Lady”, “Sir” and “Miss”, which sounded warmer. However, “Tongzhi” was still used in the political or official context or formal document.

In 1990s, the meaning of “Tongzhi” transferred to an unusual route and implied gay or lesbian status. This trend began in Hong Kong then spread to mainland. The usages in this sense were rather widespread in the internet language.

Comparatively, the formal meaning of “Tongzhi” as “people who struggle for the common ideas or a career in particular to the same political party” tends to be limited within the formal especially political community. According to the CCL corpus, the searching result of “Tongzhi” was 75804 pieces news, and none of them regarded “Tongzhi” as “gay” or “lesbian”. “Tongzhi” was mostly used as a political report meaning “people who struggle for the common ideas or a career in particular to the same political party”. But “Tongzhi” as a common social appellation hardly appears in the daily conversation and nearly faded out from people’s usual life.

The data on usages of Tongzhi in contemporary mandarin comes from CCL corpus and the sample texts are Beijing Dialect Investigation Documents, “Shi Zhuan” Ten Generalissimo in China, Biography of Zhou Enlai, Chinese Children Encyclopedia, Chinese Farmers Survey, China Government White Book and New China News Agency in 2004. 300 Concordances are collected and observation frequency is 7647. “Tongzhi” is the node word and the span is +5/-5. One concordance is selected every other 10 ones, then 10 out 30 ones are selected

According to the collocates analysis, the semantic prosody of “Tongzhi” in contemporary mandarin comes from CCL corpus can be classified into 4 types. The following form can illustrate them.

The first type with 7 cases are collocates with referential such as “several tongzhis”. The second type with 4 cases are collocates referring to gender. The third type with 18 cases are collocates with modifiers showing status or position such as “Zhou Enlai Tongzhi”. The fourth type with 1 case is “Tongzhi” as a modifier.

The usages of Tongzhi in CCL corpus show a typical stylistic feature and the unitary meaning and cultural connotation. The sample texts involve news

genre, political novel, official document and colloquial text. According to analysis of the concordances, the meaning of “Tongzhi” was “friends, like-minded people”, then it gradually changed into “people especially who are in the same party striving for the common ideas”. After the liberation, the meaning of “Tongzhi” emphasized the common goal of the revolution.

4.3 Usages in Renmin Web 2014

Uages in Renmin Web 2014 can best reflect the latest language facts. 20000 Chinese characters from Renmin Web 2014 are collected and a small-scale corpus is built. Tongzhi is the node word and the span is +5/-5. One concordance is selected every other 10 ones, then 7 out of 21 ones are selected for analysis.

According to the collocates analysis, the semantic prosody of “Tongzhi” in Renmin Web 2014 corpus can be classified into 4 types. There are 12 cases such as “Tan Wenrui Tongzhi” which are collocates with modifiers showing status or position. There is one case which is collocates with referential meaning. There are 3 cases which are collocates with typical negative affective meaning. There are 4 cases which are collocates with neutral meaning such as “Tongzhi-style Kunqu”.

There is a trend that “Tongzhi” is used increasingly in highly official and formal genre. Meanwhile, the meaning with “friends, like-minded people” used in colloquial genre obviously declined. According to the form above, the third and fourth type seem to walk a strange road: Tongzhi implies the connotation of “gay” or “lesbian”. The collocates “be involved in Tongzhi scandal” show a typical negative meaning. The meaning degradation appeared in entertainment circle and network language context.

4.4 Discussion

Concluded from the collocates analysis, with social and historical changes, the meaning changes of “Tongzhi” as the appellation occurred in two aspects. First, the identity and status expressed by the semantics of appellation were degraded. From the respective meaning as “people who struggle for the common ideas or a career in particular to the same political party” to the ridiculous meaning as a gay, “Tongzhi” as a usual appellation showing respect and warmth gradually disappeared in people's common life. Second, as a social appellation, the meaning of “Tongzhi” is narrowed to a specific range, which includes some special meeting and occasion (such as political discourse).

5 CONCLUSION

This paper explores the semantic degradation of “Tongzhi” and the reasons for the degradation. It is found that the degradation is not only a result of historical changes, but also the requirements of social language. With the development of social and historical changes, “Tongzhi” has changed in two aspects. First, the degradation of identity and status are expressed by the semantics of appellation. Second, the meaning of “Tongzhi” as “people who struggle for the common ideas or a career in particular to the same political party” is limited in a special scope, which is narrowed from the multiple context categories to a single political discourse context category.

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