

On the Polysemy of the Basic Vocabulary in the Shang Dynasty

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Abstract

It is widely believed that the Shang Dynasty vocabulary system is relatively simple, and most words are monosemous. In other words, one word has only one meaning. In fact, in the category of basic vocabulary of the system, it is exactly the opposite. There are 291 basic vocabularies in our statistics, 51% of them are polysemous. And there are 47 polysemous words which have three or more meanings, accounting for 31.3% of all polysemous words. The connections among the extended meanings are very complex. It is not as simple as what it is thought. Both the extended and original meanings have their own special rules.

Key words: Shang dynasty; Basic vocabulary; Rule

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INTRODUCTION

Heretofore, Shang Dynasty oracle inscription is the earliest Chinese literature and Chinese language material

for the present academic study, and Shang Dynasty basic vocabulary is believed to be the origin of Chinese basic vocabulary. Therefore, the radical study of Chinese basic vocabulary needs to start from the study of the oracle inscription. Study on the data of the earliest time would be of great help for a comprehensive understanding of its evolving and developing process.

Xu (2003) firstly puts forward the concept of Shang Dynasty basic vocabulary in *Shanggu Hanyu Cihuishi* 上古汉语词汇史. Although there is no further research, this book illustrates 297 basic vocabulary of Shang Dynasty for the first time and classifies them into specific categories. When the meanings of basic vocabulary are calculated in this paper, all the discussions are based on the 297 words with minor changes. For instance, a basic word with multiple meanings which belong to different categories, will be listed once only. Take “Ri (日)” for example, it belongs to the basic word class of astronomical phenomena, and also the basic word class of time. When we count, we take it as a polysemous word.

As for the terms which are still unsure of the existence in the oracle inscription, they are not included in this paper. In *Jiaguwen Zidian* 甲骨文字典 (Xu Zhongshu, 1989), there is a word “wolf” and an example “to get the wolf”. However, by comparing with *Jiaguwen Heji* 甲骨文合集 (Guo, 1982), the font of “wolf” is very vague, so it is difficult to determine the word is “wolf”. Some oracle inscription authoritative dictionaries still do not include the word “wolf”. Such as *Jiagu Wenzhi Gulin* 甲骨文字诂林 (Yu, 1996) and *Yinxu Jiagu Keci Leizuan* 殷墟甲骨刻辞类纂 (Yao, 2011). Since it is questioned whether there is the word “wolf” in oracle inscription, it is not regarded as the basic vocabulary in this paper. Accordingly, we believe the number of oracle inscription basic vocabulary is 291, which will just be the object of our polysemy study.

It is believed that the so-called vocabulary polysemy, in oracle inscription’s semantic system mainly refers to

the concept that one word has two meanings, and very few words have more than two meanings, so the semantic system of oracle inscription is comparatively simple (Wang, 1992). Zou et al. (1999) state that the number of univocal words far exceeds polysemous words in Shang Dynasty (The ratio is 77.2%: 22.8%). These ideas are generally true of the entire oracle inscription's semantic system, as proper nouns account for most of the oracle inscription vocabulary, such as names, places, countries and so on, which greatly increases the number of single meaning words. However, the situation is not the same in the range of basic vocabulary.

1. STATISTIC DATA

According to our statistical data, there are 291 basic vocabulary, among which, 141 univocal words, accounting for 48.5%, 150 polysemous words, accounting for 51.5%. And there are 47 polysemous words which have three or more meanings, accounting for 31.3% of all polysemous words.

One thing needs to be specified here is that to adopt different statistical methods of "polysemy study" will lead to different results. In ancient Chinese language, strictly speaking, a word with several different parts of speech could be used as several different words. For example, "Shi (食)" has five meanings: The first is "food" (食物); the second is "to eat" (吃); the third is a sacrificing verb (祭祀动词); the fourth is a time noun (记时名词); the fifth is "to eclipse" (蚀). Specifically speaking, the noun "Shi (食)" has two meanings: The first is "food"; the second is "eat". The verb "Shi (食)" has three meanings: The first is "to eat"; the second is a sacrificing verb; the third is "to eclipse". The noun "Shi (食)" and the verb "Shi (食)" are not the same word. They are two different polysemous words. Take "Yu (雨)" as an another example: "Yu (雨)" has two meanings: The first is a noun "rain" (雨); the second is a verb "to rain" (下雨). Therefore, the noun "rain" and the verb "to rain" are not the same word. They are each having only one meaning, so both of them are monosemic words.

2. TWO ASPECTS OF POLYSEMY

Although some word has different parts of speech, we regard them as a single word with several meanings as these meanings are closely related. In this way, the scope of polysemous words is enlarged and the number of polysemous words relative increases. Word polysemy is illustrated from the following two aspects:

2.1 Different Parts of Speech

Different parts of speech, but having a close extended relationship among different meanings. Mainly appearing like verb meaning derived from the noun meaning, noun meaning derived from the adjective meaning, adjective

meaning derived from the verb meaning, adverb meaning derived from the adjective or verb meaning, and so on. Among all, the first two cases are more common, which will be analyzed further in the next two sections:

In some cases, the original meaning of a word is an action item, and its extended meaning is the related object or the result of the action. Such as "Fu (俘)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the verb "to arrest", and "the object of being arrested" is also called "Fu (俘)" in Shang Dynasty. "Qin (禽)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the verb "to capture", while "the prey captured" is also called "Qin (禽)". "Shou (兽)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the verb "to hunt", and "the animal of being hunted" is also called "Shou (兽)". "Fa (伐)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the verb "to behead", while "the beheaded person or animal" is also called "Fa (伐)".

And vice versa. In other cases, the original meaning of a word is a noun item, and its extended meaning is the related action of the noun item. Such as "Xing (行)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the noun "road". At the same time, this term corresponds to the verb "to walk" in Shang Dynasty. "Yu (鱼)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the noun "fish", and this term is also used as the verb "to fish". "Mu (目)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the noun "eye" while it also means the verb "to see". "Shi (食)", from the shape of the Chinese character, its original meaning is the noun "food". At the same time, this term corresponds to the verb "to eat".

For some words, it is difficult to identify the original part of speech: whether it is a noun or a verb, but they could be either a noun or a verb in Shang Dynasty. For example, "Yu (雨)" might mean the noun "raindrop" or the verb "to rain". "Lei (雷)" could mean the noun "thunder" and the verb "to thunder". "Wu (雾)" has two meanings: the noun "fog" and the verb "to fog".

2.2 Same Parts of Speech

Multiple extended meanings with the same parts of speech. New meanings could be derived from the original meaning on the account of the relativity, similarity, and abstraction. More details will be discussed in the following sections:

Some meanings are derived because of the relativity. For example, the original meaning of "Bing (兵)" is "weapon", and it also refers to "the person with the weapon" from the extended meaning. The original meaning of "Chu (刍)" is "to cut grass", and it also refers to "the cattle fed on grass". The original meaning of "Yue (月)" is "moon", and it also refers to "month". In addition, in this paper the sacrificing verbs and the official names are regarded as extended meaning from the original ones due to the relativity. For example, the original meaning of

“Gu (鼓)” is “to beat a drum”. Then, it also refers to “the ritual activities by beating a drum”. The original meaning of “Fa (伐)” is “to slaughter”. It also refers to “the ritual activities using the beheaded person”. The original meaning of “Bu (卜)” is “to divine”. “It also refers to “the official who is in charge of divining”. The original meaning of “Shu (戍)” is “to guard”. It also refers to “the official who is in charge of the safeguard”.

Some meanings are derived because of the similarity, and most of them are verbs. A verb may refer to several actions which are similar to each other. Each action has different meaning, because of the different object and subject. For example, the original meaning of “Mu (牧)” is “to graze” when the object is raising animal. If the object is wild animal, the meaning is “to hunt”. If the object is a person, the meaning is “to plunder”. The original meaning of “Zhi (执)” is to arrest “when the object is a person. If the object is animal, the meaning of “Zhi (执)” is “to catch or capture”. If the object is a country, the meaning is “to attack”. The original meaning of “Chu (出)” is “to come out” when the subject is a person. If the subject is specific things, the meaning is “to appear”. If the subject is abstract things, the meaning is “to occur”.

Some other meanings are derived from the abstract concepts. For example, the original meaning of “Huo (获)” is “to catch the prey”, then, the extended meaning is “anything obtained”. The original meaning of “She (涉)” is “to cross a river by foot”, and its extended meaning is “to cross a river by some transportation”. The original meaning of “Gou (遘)” is “to meet”, and the extended meaning is “to communicate with God”.

CONCLUSION

Relatively speaking, the classifications discussed above vary with different circumstances. Sometimes an extended meaning may be derived because of comprehensive factors, so it is difficult to ensure which

one is the major reason. And an extended meaning may not be derived within one step, especially for those words with multiple meanings. To get an extended meaning will go through a process of extension and abstraction. In a word, it is not uncommon that one word has several meanings in the basic Vocabulary of Shang Dynasty. The extension of word meaning demonstrates certain characteristics and patterns (Chen, 2007). “The connections among the extended meanings are very complex, which means the meaning of the oracle inscription has developed to a certain complicated level. It is not as simple as what it is thought.” This view is of great significance to the research on the basic vocabulary of Shang Dynasty.

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