A Review of the Status Quo and Significance of Pragmatic Researches on Oracle Inscriptions

ZOU Yuan[a],[b],*

[a]Institute of Chinese Language and Documents, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
[b]School of Continuing Education, Chongqing University of Education, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Pragmatic research is an important part of grammatical study. Also, pragmatic research on oracle inscriptions is an indispensable part of the grammatical research system of oracle inscriptions. Nowadays, pragmatic studies mainly focus on modern Chinese language and foreign language teaching. The pragmatic studies on oracle inscriptions are still neither systematic nor comprehensive, only scattering in all kinds of themed researches on the grammar of oracle inscriptions. Carrying out studies on the pragmatics of oracle inscriptions is significant to establish the pragmatic research framework and will help us accurately understand the meaning of the words inscribed in oracle bones, thus creating brand new approaches for doing themed researches on oracle inscriptions.

Key words: Status; Pragmatics; Oracle inscriptions

INTRODUCTION

Oracle inscriptions of Shang Dynasty, which can be dated to more than 3,000 years ago, are the earliest literature and language material now exist in China. Oracle inscription was firstly discovered more than 110 years ago in 1899. At first, researchers groped their ways for carrying out related researches, but now this research has entered a scientific, systematic, comprehensive and deeper phase. Wang Yuxin said in his thesis *General Theory of Jiaguxue* that Jiaguxue has become today's 'popular' and 'worldwide' knowledge which has a close relationship with research subjects concerning language, history, archaeology and ancient science and technology. The significance of oracle inscription in the research of Chinese language history is that it offers many fresh and raw materials which extends the era of Chinese language history study to more than three hundred years ago and enables us to explore its root to the limit under existing conditions. Oracle researches not only supplement and correct many former conclusions in the study of Chinese language history, but also rediscover some already vanished pre-Qin Chinese language phenomena and greatly enlighten some Chinese history studies. With the development of Jiaguxue, pragmatic researches on oracle inscriptions has become more popular and got more and more attentions from scholars.

1. STATUS QUO OF PRAGMATIC RESEARCHES ON ORACLE INSCRIPTIONS

Oracle pragmatic studies do not form a special subject itself, but scatter in various fields of the oracle grammatical research. Previous grammatical studies on oracle bone inscriptions are fruitful. They can be divided into overall researches and themed researches.

1.1 Overall Researches

Overall researches outline the oracle inscriptions grammar in a general way, including *The Grammatical Study of Yin Ruins Oracle Inscription* by Guan Xiechu, the Chapter *Grammar* of *The Overview of Yin Ruins Oracle Inscription* by Chen Mengjia, *The Grammar of Yin Ruins oracle inscription* by Li Xi and *The Grammar of Oracle Inscription* by Zhang Yujin.

1.2 Themed Researches

Themed researches are also very active and fruitful. They are mainly divided into four parts.

First is the research on the category of words. Papers on notional words and function words now emerge one after another. Scholars like Liang Yinfeng, Zheng Jie, Shen Lin, Gan Lu respectively study on the nouns, verbs, adjectives and quantifiers of oracle inscriptions. Researches on pronouns and adverbs are popular in the field of function words. Chen Weizhan, Yu Suisheng, Zhang Yujin, Liu Qing discussed pronouns in oracle inscriptions. Qiu Xigui, Zhu Qixiang, Zhang Yujin, Chen Weizhan, Li Zongkun studied negative adverb. Zhang Yujin, Li Xi, Zhu Qixiang etc. studied modal adverbs. What's more, there're many outstanding academic works of function words including *The Oracle Function Words Dictionary* by zhang Yujin, *The Exploration of Oracle Function Words* by Zhao Cheng and *The Detail Study of Oracle Function Words* by Mao Zhigang.

Second is the study on syntax .There are some works specialized in the study of syntax, such as *Syntax Study of Yin Ruins Oracle Inscriptions* by Jiang Baochang, *Discussion on the Syntactic Structure of Oracle Inscriptions* by Guo Qingping & Guo Shengqiang, *The Paper of Syntactic Theory on Oracle Bone Inscriptions* by Zhu Qixiang , *The Study of Sentence Structure Type on Oracle Inscription* by Liu Qing. There are also papers discussing a certain kind or various kinds of sentence patterns.

Third is the study on word order. *The Research of Word Order on the Yin Ruins Oracle Inscriptions* by Shen Pei is a comprehensive research. Location of the object is one of the most popular studies on word order, such as *The Evolution of the Fronted Object in the Negative Sentence* by Liu Xueshun, *Weibindong*(唯宾动) *Type and its Transformation on Oracle Inscription* by Tang Yuming, *The Discussion of the Object and its Position on the Oracle Bone Inscriptions* by Tao Guoliang, *Arguments against the Theory which puts the Object in the Front with Non-conditions on Oracle Inscription* by Yang Wei, *2 Reading Notes of Word Order on Oracle Inscription* by Yu Suisheng, etc..

Forth is the study of the research on sentencing category, mainly concerning the tone of oracle inscriptions. Some scholars believe that the Oracle inscriptions are totally not or partly not interrogative sentence. Their works support this argument, such as *Some Problems of Inscriptions Wrote by Shi-group* by Li Xueqin, *The Research of the Yin Ruins Oracle Inscriptions to Determine Whether it is Interrogative Sentence* by Qiu Xigui, *Some Problems of Interrogative Sentence* by David S. Nivison. At the same time, some other scholars argue that the Yin Ruins oracle inscriptions are all interrogative sentence and they wrote thesis to support their arguments which include *The Argument of Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells is Interrogative Sentence* by Wang Yuxin. *The Theory of Divination by Oracle Inscription* and *The Discussion about the Nature on Oracle Inscriptions* by Chen Weizhan, *The Examination on the Interrogative Sentence of Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells through the dui-zhen sentence category*, *Explaining zhen-wen about Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells is Interrogative Sentence from the Uses of zhen* and *The Statement about Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells is Interrogative Sentence* by Zhu Qixiang, *the Composition of Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells* by Chen Nianfu, *the Discussion on the Mood of the Inscription on Bones or Tortoise Shells* by Zhang Yujin.

1.3 Characteristics of Current Grammatical Researches

First of all, current grammatical researches put much emphasizes on the static description, but little on the dynamic analysis. Language itself was originally born and developed with human communications and everyday life of human beings. So when doing researches we should combine static analysis with dynamic analysis and carry out dynamic researches on the basis of static researches. Oracle inscriptions are ancient writings with a long history and most of them are damaged. Even some of them are well preserved, due to the limitation of the writing materials and writing styles of the passages are always so short that researchers can hardly reproduce the language environment then. As a result of this, the static and independent grammar studies on oracle inscriptions which focus on characters, words and sentences are rather fruitful, but the dynamic grammar studies are relatively weak.

Secondly, current grammatical researches put much emphasizes on the outside form and phenomenon, but little on the deep meaning of words. Any grammatical categories are the unity of grammatical forms and grammatical meanings. Studies on grammatical form of oracle inscriptions start very early and have achieved many research findings. Leading theses in this field usually cover syntax position. But different from studies on the meaning of word, the researches on the syntax meanings are still not comprehensive.

Thirdly, current grammatical researches put much emphasizes on the syntactic analysis and ignore the semantic and pragmatic research. The three level theories of grammar, including the syntax level, the semantic level and the pragmatic level are the new progress in grammatical studies in recent years. Grammatical researches on oracle inscriptions in the field of syntax are fruitful and the researches on the composition analysis and hierarchical analysis of sentences are detailed and accurate. But the studies systematically integrated with semantic and pragmatic theories are rare.

Some scholars have tried to apply the three level theory, and in their works some findings which try to use this theory are included. For example, Shen Pei's *the Study on the Word Order of oracle inscriptions* analyzes the word order of three objects and combines the object of word order with the semantic of object. Zhang Yujin's *Study on "hui" and "wei" of oracle inscriptions* combine

the pragmatic focus theory and analyze the function of the markings of two function words in terms of focus theory. Gong Bo's *Differentiating "wu" "bi" and "bu" " fu" with Reference to Conditional Negative Expressions in Oracle Bone Inscriptions* uses the different tons of protases and apodoses to conclude that those two groups words are symmetrically distributed. This is also a successful case of using pragmatic theory to solve hot spot problems in oracle inscriptions.

In recent years, there are also some researches which have already applied dynamic investigations of the three levels theory to some researches on oracle inscriptions. For example, Liu Chunjuan's *The Pragmatic Study of Symmetry Inscription in the Oracle-Bone* uses three levels theory to systematically study on the information structure, focus and presupposition and position moving phenomena and so on, which plays an important role in Oracle grammar research. Xu Lin's *Pragmatic Analysis on Abbreviation of Loyal oracle inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty* tries to analyze the creation mechanism of some abbreviations of loyal oracle inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty and how it influences language communication and information transmission from the pragmatic perspective. The primary intention of this essay is to foster correct understandings of the effect of the oracle-bones put on the abbreviation and to promote further understandings of oracle inscriptions. Liu Xiaojie's *The Study on Paraphrasing of the Inscriptions on Oracle Bones* tries to delve into the inscriptions in the oracle bones from the perspective of paraphrasing and provide valuable language study materials for vocabulary system, grammar system, history of Chinese language, Chinese semantics and Chinese pragmatics. Wang Xianxiao *The Study on the Selection of Inscriptions on Bones or Tortoise Shells* is based on the static analysis of the structure. It introduces the dynamic pragmatic theory and discusses about the focus and the expression of the focus respectively in one chapter. This study has broadened the horizon of researches in the field of the selection of oracle inscriptions.

2. STATUS QUO OF CHINESE PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics is generally regarded as firstly joint purposed by the American philosopher Charles Morris and Rudolf Camap in 1930s, initially applied to philosophical and semiotics researches and then to the linguistics field. With the focus of modern linguistics turning from description to explanation, people began to realize that we can't solve language problems without the use of language. Also with the growing attention paid by modern researches to the purposes, motivations and methods that people used in social life activities, pragmatics begins to develop rapidly in just a few decades.

In 1980s, the concept of pragmatics was introduced to Chinese grammatical study. Hu Yushu said in the additional version of *Modern Chinese* that we need to distinguish three different types of word orders, namely the word orders of semantics, pragmatics and syntax. Later, Hu Fu and Wen Lian again mentioned the "pragmatic elements" in *Rambling Sentence Analysis*. At the same time, a large amount of foreign pragmatics papers and books was translated and introduced into China, such as Xu Guozhang's translation of *How to Do Thing with Words*, Shen Jiaxuan's selected translation of Stephen C ．Levinson's *Pragmatics*, He Ziran's *Introduction to Pragmatics*，He Zhaoxiong's *Summary of Pragmatics* etc. Pragmatics is also applied to foreign language or foreign language teaching as the research object of the pragmatics studies, such as Huang Cidong's *Pragmatics and Pragmatic Errors* which discusses the pragmatic failure of Chinese students in communication in English, He Ziran's *the Study of Pragmatics and its Significance in Foreign Language Teaching* and his *Chinese Students Pragmatic Failure in English Communication -- The Investigation of Pragmatics Differences Between Chinese and English*，Lin Jicheng's *Pragmatics Pattern of Semantic Coherence,* Lü Guangdan's *The Pragmatic Analysis On English Humors*. Then after Shi Guangan's *On the Three Levels about Grammar Researches* points out the pragmatic shall have the same research level as that of syntactic and semantic, the grammar research theory along with the three levels theory was rapidly accepted by language scholars. They have gradually paid more attentions to analyze and solving the Chinese linguistic problems by using pragmatics theory. For example, Fan Xiao's *The Grammar View of Three-Levels* discusses more in detail the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic problems, Zuo Simin's *Chinese Pragmatics* tries to establish Chinese pragmatics by combining the situation of Chinese pragmatics. Treatises that use pragmatics theory to study Chinese, especially modern Chinese, began to develop. These works are divided into three categories, the first ones are analyzed from focus aspect, the second ones are analyzed by the individual words or categories, the third ones are from the aspect of discourse. The ones studying from the perspective of focus include Fang Mei's *The Syntactic expression Technique of Chinese Contrast Focus*, Liu Xinmin's *Focus, Distribution of Focus, and to be the Focus,* Hu Zehong's *On Pragmatic presupposition,* Dong Xiufang's *Identification of Unmarked Focus and Marked Focus* etc. The ones studying from the perspective of individual words or category include Zhou Xiaobing's *Pragmatic analysis on the negative sentence with the word "bi"* (比), Zhang Wangxi's *The semantic and pragmatic analysis of the structure with the word "ba"* (把), Zhang Guoxian's *The syntactic, semantic and pragmatic analysis on the word "de"* (的), Cui Xiliang's *Pragmatic Analysis of Chinese Sentences with the word "ba"* (把), Lü Wenhua's

The preliminary study on the Pragmatic function of "了", Zhang Yufeng's *the Pragmatic study of the sentence with the word "you"* (有), Wang Daoying's *the deixis study of the word "zhe"* (这)*,"na"* (那), Shen Jiaxuan's *The uncertainty of semantic and the ambiguous sentences which cannot be differentiated* and *the study on the Pragmatic Negative*, Qi Huyang's *A Pragmatical Analysis of Modality Adverbs*. The ones studied from the aspect of discourse include Huang Guowen's *The Summary of Discourse Analysis*, Hu Zhuanglin's *The Cohesion and Coherence of Discourse*, Liao Qiuzhong's *Space and Time Reference Point of The Modern Chinese Discourse*, *The Connected Components of Modern Chinese Discourse*, *The Expression Referring to the Same of Modern Chinese Discourse, Discourse and the Research of Pragmatic and Syntactic,* Wang Fuxiang's *The Pragmatic Analysis on Chinese Discourse Linguistics* and Shen Kaimu's *Modern Chinese Discourse Linguistics*.

With the development of Chinese pragmatic research, more and more scholars are trying to use pragmatics theories to carry out researches on the inscriptions of Oracle Bone, which has provided new inspirations for scholars to solve some hot spot issues and difficult problems. But generally, the pragmatics studies of oracle inscriptions are still not systematic and comprehensive (for the details please refer to the above parts).

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

(a) Pragmatic research is an important part of grammatical study. Also, Pragmatic research on oracle inscriptions is an indispensable part of the grammatical research system of oracle inscriptions.

Shi Guangan's *On the Three Levels about Grammar Researches* points out that "pragmatic level is concerned about the use of language. Instead of only doing static description on the one side, it has turned into a new stage of combining the static description with the dynamic researches". By applying the pragmatics study of oracle inscriptions and combining the form and meaning, static and dynamic research, as well as paying attention to the generator and coding perspectives and clearing and comparing different syntactic forms with the same meanings, we can make the oracle syntax researches more scientific and systematic and promote the future development of the fruitful syntactic researches.

(b) Pragmatic studies of oracle inscriptions will help to establish pragmatics research framework which adapt to the real situation of oracle inscription.

Since current pragmatics studies mainly concentrate on modern Chinese and foreign language, this study tries to combine the new achievements of general pragmatics and Chinese pragmatics with the grammar of oracle inscriptions and to establish the pragmatics research framework of oracle inscriptions.

(c) Pragmatics study of oracle inscriptions is helpful to accurately understand the meaning of oracle inscriptions.

Starting from the pragmatics level, combining paragraphs and texts of oracle inscriptions and breaking down the language forms and grammatical structure, we cannot be only better figure out the distinction between synonym and oracle inscriptions of similar structure, but also reveal their pragmatics features.

(d) Pragmatics studies of oracle inscriptions will provide new approaches for the current thesis studies on oracle inscriptions.

The thesis studies include the focus of the meaning of oracle inscriptions, the distinction of negative words on the oracle inscription, the logical relation of the protases and apodoses on the oracle inscriptions and the grammatical rule of the words in the protases and apodoses on the oracle inscriptions.

CONCLUSION

As pragmatics and Jiaguxue researches has lasted for a long time and remain active, rich and profound, it is the right time to study the pragmatics of oracle inscriptions. The pragmatics researches on oracle inscriptions should base on the actual situation of oracle inscriptions to describe the real situations of the use of oracle bones language with insights and systematically study the pragmatic form of this language from a pragmatics point of view and through combining the research results of the traditional pragmatics and Chinese pragmatics (which mainly focus on modern Chinese) with the words and grammar of oracle language. In this way we will be able to deduce the usage and expression rules of oracle inscriptions and in the end build a pragmatics research framework for oracle inscriptions which best fits the studies of oracle inscriptions and contributes to complement the pragmatics parts of researches on oracle inscriptions.

REFERENCES

Chen, M. J. (1988). *The overview of Yin Ruins oracle inscription*. Chinese Publishing House.

Fan, X. (1994). *The grammar view of three-levels*. China: Beijing Language and Culture Institute Press.

Guan, X. C. (1953). *Grammatical study of Yin Ruins oracle inscription*. Chinese Aacademy of Sciences.

He,Z. R., & Ran, Y. P. (2006). *Introduction to pragmatics*. Changsha, China: Hunan Education Press.

Shen, P. (1992). *The research of word order on the Yin Ruins oracle inscriptions, Taibei*. Wenjin Press.

Wang,Y. X. (1989). *General theory of Jiaguxue*. China Social Science Press.

Zhang,Y. J. (2001). *The grammar theory of the inscription on bones or tortoise shells*. China: Shanghai Xuelin Press.

Zuo, S. M. (2000). *Chinese pragmatics*. Zhengzhou, China: Henan people's Publishing House.