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An inquiry into the relationship between sound and meaning of Chinese characters

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Respected Venerable Shengmiao and my teacher, good afternoon. My name is Qixuan Zhou and I would like to share with you the topic on “An inquiry into the relationship between sound and meaning of Chinese characters”.

Let us first take a look at primitive society. Imagine a scenario in which two primitive people who do not yet have a complete language system, Primitive A, want to ask Primitive B to help him carry the prey he has harvested today back to camp. What would Primitive A do at this time? The only way is to "dance with his hands and feet", using physical movements to tell Primitive B what he wants to convey. Of course, some people can also think, although they do not have a complete language system, they still have some simple onomatopoeia, such as "ah" "oh" this kind of, they may be through these sounds to assist. For example, if there is a lot of prey this time, primitive A will tell primitive B to call more people to move it with a long "ah" and some hand gestures. After more and more times, whenever a person hears the long-toned "ah", he knows that there are many things, and the meaning of "many" is combined with the sound "ah". We can see that before there were words, people expressed their meanings not only by physical actions but also by sounds, and after more and more sounds that could express meanings, language was formed. Based on the above, we can find that at the beginning of language, the relationship between sound and meaning was very close.

The emergence of writing has changed the situation. Let's still imagine a scenario where primitive man A wants to tell his partner that he is out hunting, but his partner is not at home, so what would he do? At that time, the physical and verbal can not convey the message, he can only use a branch in the sand to draw a few simple symbols to indicate that he went out hunting. Here we find that the symbols here are directly linked to the meaning. Similarly, as more and more people used such symbols to remember things, then some common things also had agreed symbols, which formed our earliest pictographs. From the above two examples, we can see that in the early days, the shape of the symbols and the sound of the language were directly linked to the meaning, so how were the shape and sound-related? It is obvious that the meaning is the bridge, for example, the sun, we have an agreed-upon phonetic "sun". And then we draw a symbol of the sun in order to express this thing, then in the role of the sun as a bridge to the meaning of the sun, the sun-shaped symbol we can read " sun ". Regarding this phenomenon, Professor Zhu also pointed out that if people called "sky" as earth and "black" as white from the beginning, it would be fine as long as everyone accepted it.¹

Of course, the process of the creation of words is not so simple, so here is just a simple inference to look at the relationship between the three forms, sounds, and meanings in the earliest days. In our simple logical reasoning, in the earliest days, both the form and the sound of the word were directly linked to the meaning of the word. In terms of the relationship between the sound and the meaning of the word, it is clear that at the very beginning there was not a one-to-one correspondence, but rather a convention. This is explained in Xunzi: “There is no such thing as a name that is originally appropriate

¹ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *xunguaxue zhilv* 訓詁學之旅 [The Journey of Exegesis], (Taipei, New Sharing Culture Enterprise), p29.

but is named by common agreement, and if it is agreed, the name is appropriate, and if not, the name is inappropriate.”²

Looking at the process by which early sounds and meanings became associated, we can see that there was no necessary connection between the original sounds and meanings. But scholars in the past, through our previous similar subjective inferences, often had a misunderstanding that there was a necessary connection between the original sounds and meanings. For example, Mr. Zhang Taiyan in his "Phonetic Origins" has this view: "Language does not come out of thin air, the ancient pronunciation of the character *ma* 馬 must mean 'horse', the ancient pronunciation of the character *niu* 牛 must mean cow"³ Thus, he linked several words he thought were related to each other, like the character *ma* 馬 and the character *wu* 武, and the character *niu* 牛 and the character *shi* 事. The ancient pronunciation of these words are similar, but it is too subjective to combine two words that are related in meaning on this basis alone. Let's go back to the scene we envisioned at the beginning, the sound "ah" which is combined with the meaning of "many" is in fact an "onomatopoeia", only "onomatopoeia" has a real objective connection between the sound and the meaning. It is not only the human voice that is simulated, for example, the ancient pronunciation of the character *ji* 雞 *ya* 鴨 *e* 鵝 are the words that are simulated by the animal voice.

Today we do not discuss how language is produced, but explain from the exegetical point of view, since there is no necessary connection between the original sound and meaning. Then why is there a so-called "sound and meaning spring from the same source" 聲義同源, or "sound and meaning common if close in pronunciation" 音近義通?⁴ This is because although there is often no necessary connection between the sound and the meaning of the combination, but when it is combined, because the language is constantly developing and changing, from the early sound-meaning combination of the composition of the "root", breeding and differentiation of new words, these words are called "cognate", the exegetical so-called "sound for meaning" is essentially looking for "cognate", that is, for the root.

This is a theory that Mr. Duan Yucai has repeatedly argued in *Shuowen Jiezi*.⁵ This brings us to another interesting part of the phonetic-syntactic relationship in Chinese characters, namely, the part of the phonetic side of a character that represents its meaning. Most Chinese characters are morphemes, which are simply divided into morphological and acoustic characters. Generally speaking, the morphemes represent the meaning and the phonetic symbols represent the sound, which constitute the morpho-syntactic meaning of a character.⁶ However, according to the sound-meaning relationship we discussed above, we can understand that pronunciation can also play a role in meaning. In the case of morpho-syntactic characters, it is the so-called "phonetic ideograms". This theory has a long history, dating back to Yang Quan's *Theory of Things* in the Jin Dynasty, which was later called "the right text"⁷, and then to Mr. Duan Yucai's famous theory that "and then to Mr. Duan Yucai's famous theory that "all sounds from a certain sound radical usually have a certain meaning ". Secondly, the so-called

² Li disheng 李滌生, *xunzi jishi* 荀子集釋 [The annotation of *Xunzi*], (Taipei, Taiwan Student Book), p516.

³ Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, *guogu lunheng* 國故論衡 [Discourses Traditional Chinese Culture Weighed in the Balance], (Beijing, The Commercial Press), p516.

⁴ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *xunguaxue zhilv* 訓詁學之旅 [The Journey of *Exegesis*], (Taipei, New Sharing Culture Enterprise), p32.

⁵ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p2183.

⁶ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p207.

⁷ Zhou Bixiang 周碧香, *shiyong xunguxue* 實用訓詁學 [Exegesis], (Taipei, Hung Yeh Publishing), p61.

ideograms of vocal symbols are not expressed in terms of their shape, but rather in terms of the meaning behind the sound they represent, which has its own relevance.

All in all, in today's presentation, I have explored the connection between sound and meaning, showing how sound and meaning were first linked together and how the phenomenon of "cognate words" and "phonetic ideograms" evolved. That's all for today's presentation. Thank you for listening.

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