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Synonym-Compounds in the Ancient Time

Good afternoon, Respected Professor. Good morning Mr Zhang and my dear classmates. Today, I would like to talk about Synonym-Compounds in the Ancient Time.

My presentation is composed by 3 parts: I would have a short introduction to synonym-compounds, then I would give some examples of them with my further question and study after the class, and I would have some feelings to express as the conclusion of this studying.

So the first thing we have to figure out is - What is a synonym- compound?

Synonym-Compounds are coordinated compound words composed of monosyllabic words with the same or similar meaning as the root.

This is a basic explanation of synonym compound words in Chinese.

Interestingly, these synonym compound words in ancient China were very different from today. Many words that are

called synonym compounds today were used separately in ancient times, and the two characters have, or even completely opposite meanings. And that's what we're going to talk about today.

First, let's look at the word '疾病'.

In today's Chinese, there is no difference between the character '疾' and '病', they both represent the meaning of disease. But in ancient times, Each of them have different meanings.

Let's look at 疾 first。

If you just look at the character in form of Lesser seal character, you can not directly see its original meaning. If we look at the oracle bone inscriptions on the right, we can understand it vividly: it's the image of a person being shot in the armpit by an arrow.

According to the previous ancient books, it is often interpreted as the meaning of 'quick', which is an extended meaning. As sudden and unexpected like the disease comes.

This is the interpretation of the character from 說文解字.

That is to say, what it originally meant was the kind of minor illness that came quickly but not seriously. It's like being shot by an arrow in the armpit, it won't hurt badly, but suddenly.

Mencius recorded such a story: Mencius was about to visit a king, and the king sent someone to visit him and told him: 'I was planning to visit you, but I got a sudden cold and Doctor told me I can't go out. I will go to the court tomorrow, I don't know if I can see you there?'

According to this story, the king was originally going to visit Mencius, but suddenly caught a cold. Therefore, he can't visit Mencius by leaving his palace, but he can work normally the next day, which just shows that the disease came on quickly and wasn't serious.

There is also a very famous story. There was once a doctor named Bian Que, who also went to see a king and told him that there is a small disease between your skin and muscles, if not treated in time, this small disease will worsen. But the king ignored the doctor's words.

The word 疾 is also used here for indicating that the disease was not serious when the doctor first saw the king.

Let's take a look at the character '病'.

This character does not have the form of oracle bone inscriptions, it may be a word created later, so I only found it in Lesser seal character from the Warring States Period. The word on the right is from Baoshan Chu Jian.

說文解字 interprets this character as serious disease, and Mr. Duan Yucai later quoted Mr. Bao Xian's comment: when 疾 exacerbated, it became 病.

Let's go back to the story about Bianque.

Ten days have passed. Doctor Bian Que went to visit the king again and told him: 'Your 病 has reached between the muscles and the bones, and if it is not treated in time, it will deepen.' The king still did not believe him. The doctor visited the king many times in this way, but the king did not listen to his advice. One day, the king felt very uncomfortable and sent someone to find Doctor Bian Que, only to find out that the doctor had already left the country. Few days later, the king died, just like what the doctor said.

Here is another interesting thing.

In the class, the professor once mentioned a story in the Analects about a student of Confucius called 伯牛 who was ill and Confucius visited him:

In the original text, the word is 疾. What confused me is that this is different from other scholars' explanations: most of them think that 伯牛 has a very serious illness and may be dying, which is why Confucius is very sad.

Fortunately, I found the answer in some scholar's book. The Japanese scholar たけぞえしんいちろう (竹添進一郎) once quoted (in his book) another version of the story recorded in Huainanzili.

The word used in it is "厲", and "厲" is same to '癘' which is a very serious disease after the aggravation of "疾".

And like other scholars, when explaining this story, they mostly use disease.

Let's look at the next example: 翱翔

I did not find a detailed explanation of the character '翱' in 說文解字. But I found it in the explanation of the word 翔. Up and down the wings are called 翱. straightening wings and slide without moving, is called 翔. 曲禮 said : Do not 翔 in the

room. Zhengxuan said: straightening your arm like birds straight their wings while walking is called 翔.

Let's look at one last example. '飢餓',

The professor told us a story in class about a man called the 虬髯客 which means a man with curly whisker. The 虬髯客 asked another character named 李靖 in the story about what he was cooking, and 李靖 replied that it was mutton. He shamelessly said that he was hungry, implying that 李靖 should give him some mutton. The hungry here was translated from the word '饑' in the original text. From here we can see that 饑 means that you feel hungry and need some foods, May not have much energy , but not serious.

But if you look at the word '餓', there is a passage in 'Mencius': 'There are so many fat meats in the noble's kitchen, fat horses in the noble's barn, while the citizens are hungry, and starved corpses at suburb.' The starved corpses here are '餓', not '饑'.

From the previous examples, many words of today's synonym-compound words often have relative meanings in ancient times. Sometimes two characters represent different degrees of a certain event or a state; sometimes two characters

They represent different ways of accomplishing an action.

I often hear a lot of people think that accuracy is a big shortage of Chinese characters, sometimes people misunderstand each other's meaning because of the similarity of word's meaning or pronunciations.

But after studying this class, I found out that in ancient China, we had a lot of different characters to express the different degrees of a thing, the different states of a person, etc. Almost everything has different character to explain to different degrees, and I guess that's why we have so many poetry.

When I used to learn to write poetry, I often wondered: Chinese people have written poems for thousands of years, why can people continue to write them today? Why couldn't the ancients write all the poems? Now I also found the answer, because Chinese characters are actually very precise characters, Everyone encounters different things at different times and places, and we have enough words and phrases to describe what we encountered or what we imagined and write it down in our own poetry.

Thank you for listening, any feedback and suggestion would be appreciated.

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