

The Formation Mechanism of Letter Words and Its Influences on the Modern Chinese

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Abstract— The letter words have begun to enter the modern Chinese lexical system and effectively undertaken the social communicative functions both in science and technology and in everyday life. The Chinese letter words results from the operation of the natural selection mechanism of the Chinese language. The chance that triggers the selection mechanism is mainly the compensation principle of language contact, language economical principle and the psychology for novelty and difference. The essence of Chinese letter words is the inheritance and variation of the foreign load words. Chinese lettered-words inject new blood to Chinese vocabulary system, enrich Chinese phonetic system, ideographic diversification and the Chinese word formation.

Index Terms—Chinese letter word, Chinese vocabulary system, formation mechanism, natural selection

Language is a product of social organization and evolves with the social development. (Luo, 2004, p. 14). In today's world, the science and technology is advancing rapidly. "Zero Distance in Space" and "zero distance of Information" lead to the explosive growth of new knowledge, new things and new concepts. The recording and communicative functions of Chinese lexical system, which, originally, were relatively self-contained, appear to lag behind seriously. Because it can not record conveniently and effectively the new techniques, new achievements and new concepts, it has to turn to some foreign words to cover the vacancies in Chinese lexical system. The letter words, which are simple, economical, instant and easy to connect the international community, have begun to enter the modern Chinese lexical system and effectively undertaken the social communicative functions both in science and technology and in everyday life. They are new members of the modern Chinese vocabulary system and win the name of "Chinese Letter Words". (Liu, 2002, pp. 85-90). Chinese language researchers have paid great attention to this phenomenon and combined the research on the letter words with the lexicology, cultural studies and social linguistics, etc. They have made a series of studies on the definition, classification, specification and dictionary editing of the letter word and have achieved a lot. (Jianmei Liu, 2002; Yongquan Liu, 2002; Mengying Chen, 2002; Xiaolin Zhou, 2003; Youwe Shi, 2004). However, what they have studied is mainly focused on the exposition of some problems in practical use of the letter words. As for the theoretical basis of the spread and choice of the letter words, there are no researches. This paper intends to start from the natural selection mechanism to explore the generation of lettered words in Chinese and analyze its effects on modern Chinese vocabulary system.

I. THE CAUSES OF LETTERED WORDS IN CHINESE

"Natural selection" in the natural selection mechanism has worked the same in the evolution of language. The principle of the selection mechanism is, in various forms of languages which exist chronically or diachronically, naturally selecting the forms in accordance with the laws and language environment at that time. (Che, 2005, pp.93-96). The Chinese letter words results from the operation of the natural selection mechanism of the Chinese language. The chance that triggers the selection mechanism is mainly the compensation principle of language contact, language economical principle and the psychology for novelty and difference.

A. *Compensation Principle of Language Contact*

Language is a tool by which the human beings think, transmit information and communicate one another. It has dual attributes: social and systematic. (Lu, 2004, p.2). The social nature of language determines the nature of variation of the system of linguistic signs. Only the language symbols that can reflect social changes in time can efficiently carry out its function of social communication.

The 21st century is the information age. The world trend of globalization is accelerating. Contacts and exchanges of the international community in science and technology, culture, and economy have become increasingly widespread and frequent. Due to the social and cultural heterogeneity, different languages by which people use in communication do not have the capabilities of describing the unique things and ideas in the other community. To achieve the function of exchanging instant social information, both sides in communication must turn to the other's words to reflect the loan elements in order to cover the vacancy in the native language. (Zheng, 2008, pp. 202-204). At the same time, the science and technology develops rapidly. People have even more profound understanding of civil society. New

techniques, new things and new concepts appear at any time. Language compensation mechanism requires that new words should be created to timely and continually record the new cognitive achievements to realize the communicative function. The well-developed vehicles and convenient communication tool have resulted in "zero distance in space" and "zero distance from information". New things and new words have accelerated their spread in speed and scope. And different languages have deeply strengthened their absorption and integration with one another.

The world economy has grown rapidly and the results of the human civilization appear like mushrooms after the spring rain. The language, which lags behind the social development, leads to the defects of recording function of the modern Chinese lexical system and the timely cross-cultural communication can not be achieved. Thus some English words, which stand for new techniques and new achievements are directly quoted, as transitional written symbols, are "borrowed" to the modern Chinese vocabulary system to undertake certain communicative functions. Under the selection mechanism, some are discarded while others are accepted and become the components of the modern Chinese vocabulary system. Letter words in Chinese, to meet the need of the cross-cultural communication in the two heterogeneities of Chinese and English, are variants of compensation in the selection mechanism within the system. In other words, the objective need of improving the modern Chinese language system triggers the compensation mechanism, as is the external driving force of the generation of the Chinese letter words.

B. Language Economical Principle

Martinet, a French linguist, put forward the concept of language economical principle. He points out that people, under the premise that the communicative functions are sure to be achieved, will consciously or unconsciously make arrangements in line with the economical law of the power consumption in speech activities. (Xu, 1994, pp.12-17). People in their daily speech activities follow the economical principle and the economical mechanism plays an important role of restriction on the evolution of the language system. Language scholars have reached a consensus on this point. (Zhimin Xu, 1994; Weiping Dai, 2005; Zhengkao Xu, 2008; Chaohung Zheng, 2008).

Language economical principle requires that, under the premise that verbal communication can be smoothly achieved; the economical variants or the simplest and clearest voice signals or printed symbols should be adopted to convey more information. That is to say, the language users always try to obtain the greatest effect by consuming the least energy. The loan English letter words are made of the English initials. Compared with its corresponding translation words or the original Chinese words, the length of a language unit is greatly reduced. "Chinese Proficiency Test (reads in Chinese: hanyu shuiping kaoshi)" has 12 bytes, but the initials of the Chinese Pinyin is HSK with only three letters. "Gross national product (guomin shengchan zongzhi in Chinese)" has 12 bytes, while the English initials of GDP have only 3 letters. The length of the letter words is reduced to a few tenths or hundredths compared with the original language units, which to a great extent shortens the known information and improves the speed and efficiency of information transmission to facilitate verbal communication to be more convenient, effective and intimate in the society with high growth of economy.

Following the language economical principle as far as possible, letter words are simple in word building and easy to write and they have strong expressiveness. They can be borrowed into modern Chinese vocabulary system and possess a place in the modern Chinese lexical system. Therefore, the language economical principle causes the natural selection of linguistic symbols. (Xu, 2008, pp.9-12). Chinese letter words are the fruit made by the language economical principle to carry out the natural selection in different grammatical forms of the English abbreviations, the original Chinese words, and interpretations of the word translation of natural selection.

C. Pragmatic Psychology for Novelty and Difference

It is an open world today and people are very active in thinking. There appears a psychological tendency of novelty and difference in language use. In particular, some young people, who are not satisfied with the rigid language mode and tired of the standard narrative style, are seeking the discourse mode of free thinking and free expression.

Basically speaking, loan words reflect those things with the most distinctive modern cultural characteristics. Letter words, standing for new things, new concepts and new information, have become a kind of clear symbols in youth cultural circle. Young people mix some foreign words or letter words when speaking Chinese to display their personalities by using the defamiliarization of the words and sentences to demonstrate they are standing in the front of the times. Cool, PK and other words are accepted by the young people for they have strong sense of the times and foreign flavor and then become quickly popular in the whole China. "Party", "VIP" and "MTV" become the heterotypic words in competition with pure Chinese characters because they have the sense of the urban life. "IT" (information technology), GPS (global positioning system) and other letter words on behalf of professional terms of the high-tech information technology can show the sense of superiority of standing at the forefront of the times. CEO (chief executive official) and MBA (master of business administration) are able to demonstrate the good quality and fashionable language skills. The pragmatic psychology for novelty and difference has become a driving force for letter words in contemporary times to become very active in Chinese lexical system.

Pragmatic psychology for novelty and difference makes the language users seek the mode of discourse with personality. Thus a large number of new words represented by the letter words have been borrowed and introduced. The pragmatic language psychology of convergence leads the users to chase the trend and the letter words have been promoted rapidly and widely.

II. LETTER WORDS PRODUCE EFFECTS ON THE MODERN CHINESE

In the last decade, letter words have crowded into Chinese stock. Due to the sensitive impact of the letter words, as for the relationship between the letter words and Chinese, many media remark that it is a kind of "pollution", "erosion" or "replacement" of one language to the other. Powerful language over the weak language is seen as the language colonialism. In the sensitive process, the letter words are symbolized and are interpreted as a prophecy about the fate of an ethnic language. During this process, a relatively small event leads to a language panic of "defamiliarization and purification of a national language". The problem seems to be more serious, which makes the media, the principal agents of social control and cultural institutions, dictionary, and governments begin to have a complete cooperation at last. This process also includes the introduction of a new social control to deal with problems perceived. For example, legal sanctions, the media direction, norm establishment and dictionary certification are adopted to guide and recommend the promotion and utilization of the standardized letter words. More and more letter words are accepted by the authoritative communicative carrier, that is, dictionaries, which do not only ensure the longevity of the letter words in the future development of Chinese vocabulary but also maintain the influences of the letter words on the Chinese vocabulary.

Letter words are borrowed in meaning, sound and shape to enter the modern Chinese vocabulary system. Inheritance and variability has always been the essential characteristics of the loan words. English letters and Chinese characters have different shape and source. Letter words become variants in the process when they are localized in Chinese. In the aspects of voice system, writing form, and word building, they have produced an unprecedented impact on the Chinese vocabulary system.

A. *The New Phoneme Combination Enters the Chinese Phonetic System*

The English letter words in the modern Chinese vocabulary have affected the verbal system of Chinese characters in form, and produced the impacts on the original law of Mandarin phonology and create new syllable forms. In such letter words as "QQ", "Karaoke", "CD" and so on, "QQ" is pronounced as "kiukiu", "Karaoke" pronounced as "kalaoukei", and "CD" as "seidi". "Kiu" break the law of the combination of initial consonants and vowels in the Mandarin, ie, a velar can not be put together with a vowel. The syllables of "kei" and "sei" also violate the law of combination of Mandarin phonology. Besides, X reads "aiks" and W reads "dabliu". In Chinese phonetic system there appear consonant clusters like "ks" and "bl", etc. With the application of the letter words, undoubtedly new ingredients are likely to be added to the Chinese phonetic system.

B. *Ideographic Diversification*

Chinese is the only ideographic characters in today's world. For several thousand years Chinese characters have been a single form to load the Chinese vocabulary system. The appearance of the curved phonetic letters breaks the situation that dominated by the ideographic Chinese characters. The appearance of letter words makes the ideographic mode, a character with a meaning, inherent in Chinese shock begin to change. A new ideographic mode forms that a letter has a meaning, or two letters have a meaning or even several letters possess one meaning. Such as the X-type personnel (people with a cross-disciplinary professional knowledge), Esc key (Esc = Escape, Exit button), etc. Written Chinese has become hybrid of ideographic and phonetic writing system.

Letter words entering the Chinese lexical system means that the language system itself gives beneficial adjustment to the language recording, which makes Chinese more inclusive to meet the new requirements of the recording function of Chinese in the global exchanges in the era of information, as marks for thousands of years the Chinese vocabulary system with the Chinese characters as a single load form begin to be open and plural.

C. *The New Word-building Method Enters the Chinese Word Formation*

Letter words, as a kind of heterogeneity of Chinese words, have made up for the defects of Chinese words in the word-building method and ability, opening up a new alternative way of building words for the native language.

1) The free word-building method with phonetic-semantic compound

The English-Chinese letter words, compounded by the Latin letters and Chinese morpheme is in a state of transliteration and ideographic morpheme, such as DINK families (Double Income, No Kids.), DOS system (DOS means Disk Operating System), etc. These words are all ideographic characters with morpheme forms. The letters in DINK and DOS have separate pronunciations and meanings. They are words too. Compounded with Chinese ideographic morpheme, they become new words. As a whole, these words are ideographic. But at the same time, they have independent ideography internally. Therefore, they have a free form in word formation with meaningless contact between syllables. But as a word, it is inseparable.

2) The letter of the word morpheme

Some foreign Latin morphemes often participate in the Chinese word formation and have become strong word morpheme. For example, e-era, e-family, e-community, IT industry, IT companies, IT people, IT elite, etc are not rare. These words are born with the letter morphemes as the roots. As a rule, e is related with digitals or electronics or information network. And IT is contacted with information technology. It can be seen that these letters have been related with some relatively stable meaning and have become the new letter morphemes in Chinese stock.

D. The Compound Words Composed by Letter Words and Chinese Morphemes will be One of the Most Powerful Mode of Existence of the Letter Words

A type of English-Chinese compound words formed by letters and Chinese morphemes will be widely spread in Chinese. DINK families, DOS systems, e-era, IT industry, and so on have already been mentioned above. These English-Chinese compound words formed by letters and Chinese morphemes have ideographic functions both as a whole and within the words. They result from the interaction of two languages or two cultures. In essence, cultural practices are wrestled right behind the curtain. The conflicting social groups, classes, individuals or discourses are all trying to use the symbols and make them bear the meanings of their own. (Eagleton, 1983, p.117). Confronted with the invasion of the exported languages, writers and speakers from the imported languages are encouraged to get rid of the significance of the imported words and try to make full use of them with the other psychological task be able to undertake their own cultural experience and convey their spirits. When language are associated with the national characters, language practice will be transformed to be the media to assume political and cultural tasks to construct a myth about national identity and power: to get rid of the identity imposed by the other language, reconstruct or rehabilitate their native culture to restore their nominal identity and assume their political ambitions. This makes the myth consumers consider it as an inalienable national identity by sinicizing English loan words or part of them. In this way, the concept of the myth is absolutely revealed to all of the consumers. And the localized English loan words, which can afford to undertake the national language psychology, have been successfully incorporated to be part of the power structure of maintaining the "national community". The compound words made by letter words and Chinese morphemes are helpful to strongly support the language power structure of "national community" and thus will be the most powerful mode of existence in letter words.

III. CONCLUSION

Languages of different nations are mutually complementary. (Bloomfield, 1993, p. 445). Chinese letter words inherit and change the foreign words under the function of the language natural selection mechanism. The so-called inheritance means that they are similar with the original words in sound, meaning and spelling. And the so-called variation means that, affected and constrained by the mother tongue, the quality of the original words are changed. Letter words in Chinese have undertaken the indispensable communicative functions and have become an integral part in Chinese language, spiritual and cultural life and a proof for modern Chinese to develop diversely and to advance with the times.

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