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## THE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMANTIC BIAS IN PARTIALLY-DIRECTED COMPOUND WORDS OF MODERN CHINESE

In this paper I will present an analysis of the semantic bias in partially-directed compound words (PCWs) in modern Chinese. As a very special type of compound words, PCWs are of great value to the study of modern Chinese. They can prove and reveal the inseparable relationship between ancient Chinese and modern Chinese. Furthermore, we can judge the cultural psychology of Chinese nation through the analysis of the bias feature.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of PCW was proposed by Mr. Li Jin Xi first who said: “复合词中之并行词, 有偏用其一字之义, 而他字则连举而不为义者, 称为‘复词偏义’。”(Li Jin Xi 1930; after Du Chun Zi 2004:17) (Translation:<sup>1</sup> *In the compound words, there is a category of parallel words whose meaning refers to only one of the characters, while the other character has no meaning. This category of words is called compound words with partially-directed meaning.*) Since then, the academic community uses PCW to refer to the concept.

Originally, PCW is a special category of compound words in ancient Chinese: “它是用两个单音的近义词或反义词作为语素组成的, 其中一个词素的本来意义成为这个复音词的意义, 另一个词素只是作为陪衬。”(1999: 90) (Translation: *It is composed of a synonym or antonym with two single syllables as its morphemes, in which the original meaning of one morpheme becomes the real meaning of the disyllable, and the other morpheme only serves as a contrast.*)

Initially, these particular compound words were born mainly out of the need of expression by using them occasionally at the appropriate time so as to gain the effect of relaxing tones, coordinating syllables, and enhancing the musical beauty of the

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<sup>1</sup> I provide my own translation of all the citations and Chinese examples.

language. So we can say that at that time it was merely a temporary means of rhetoric, and not standardized words. Later on, with the development and evolution of vocabulary, some of those words which were used with high frequency and acceptability gradually solidified into words and were preserved, and thus the word category called PCW was formed. Objectively speaking, this development is in line with the disyllabic trend during the process of the evolution of ancient Chinese to modern Chinese. In the alternating changes of those words from ancient to modern Chinese, modern Chinese not only absorbed some PCWs of the ancient Chinese, but also added some new features.

## 2. Comparison of ancient and modern PCWs

The construction of PCW belongs to the coordinative type of compound words, and they can be divided into two categories according to the morphemic relationship in general. The first category contains synonymous PCWs which are composed of two related or similar morphemes in meaning, like in:

国家 (guójiā), 国 (nation) + 家 (principality) = 国家 (nation).  
 窗户 (chuānghù), 窗 (window) + 户 (door) = 窗户 (window).  
 人物 (rénwù), 人 (person) + 物 (thing) = 人物 (person).  
 质量 (zhìliàng), 质 (quality) + 量 (quantity) = 质量 (quality).

The other category contains antonymous PCWs which are composed of two opposite morphemes in meaning.

动静 (dòngjìng), 动 (move) + 静 (motionless) = 动静 (activity).  
 忘记 (wàngjì), 忘 (forget) + 记 (memorize) = 忘记 (forget).  
 睡觉 (shuìjiào), 睡 (sleep) + 觉 (wake) = 睡觉 (sleep).  
 作息 (zuòxī), 作 (work) + 息 (rest) = 作息 (rest).

Compared with the ancient PCWs, modern Chinese PCWs have two main features:

### *2.1. In modern Chinese, PCWs have a more definite direction and are less likely to cause misunderstanding*

**First of all, we needn't judge whether a given word is a PCW by the context as we do with the ancient Chinese.**

Because monosyllables prevailed in ancient Chinese, the two morphemes of a future compound were originally separate words in ancient Chinese, so the reader often has to judge by the context what these two synthetic monosyllabic characters are now, a phrase or a word. To a certain extent it increases the burden of understanding.

In the example below, in sentence 1), the former “国家” (nation) is a PCW which biases 国, while the latter, “国” and “家” refer to their historic meanings:

1) 吾闻国家之立也, 本大而末小, 是以能固。故天子建国, 诸侯立家。  
----- 《左传·桓公二年》

‘I heard something about the foundation of a nation that it could be consolidated because of the big root and small branches. Therefore the emperor built a kingdom and the vassal built a principality.’ Biography Zuo • Duke Huan year two

In the pre-Qin era, “国” in “国家” refers to the administrative region ruled by the emperor and the princes while the “家” refers to the administrative regions ruled by vassals. With the development of society, the feudal fief system was abolished and a unified feudal kingdom established, so the meaning of “家” withered away naturally. Any reader who wants to know the meaning of the sentence exactly must understand what is “国” and what is “家”.

For further illustration, let us compare the two examples below:

2) 饥而食, 渴而饮, 『日出而作, 日入而息』, 其所以饮食作息者, 皆道之所在也。-----朱子语类卷第六十二中庸一 纲领

‘To eat with hunger, to drink with thirst, to work with sunrise, to rest with sunset. The reasons why people eat, drink, work and rest are all where Tao lies.’ The Doctrine of the Mean. Creed in *Zhuzi Language Category*, Volume 62

3) 书头教娘勤作息, 书尾教娘莫瞌睡。----- 《五灯会元》

‘To ask the mother to work diligently at the beginning of the letter, to request the mother not to doze at the end of the letter.’ *Five Lanterns meet in the Lantern Festival*

In sentence 2), the “作” and the “息” are separate words and “作息” is a phrase, while in sentence 3) the “作息” is a PCW, which biases “作” according to the context.

**Secondly, the bias direction of PCW in modern Chinese is generally fixed, but uncertain in ancient PCWs.**

There are many Modern Chinese PCWs whose bias trends are always constant. They are “好歹 (good + bad)”, “长短 (long + short)”, “动静 (move + motionless)”, “褒贬 (appreciate + depreciate)”, “国家 (nation + principality)”, “窗户 (window + door)”, “忘记 (forget + memorize)”, their meanings are “歹 (bad)”, “短” (short), “动” (move), “贬” (depreciate), “国” (nation), “窗” (window), “忘” (forget) respectively. Although sometimes we have to rely on the context, most of the time the context is unnecessary, when seeing Chinese PCWs we often need to distinguish which one is the contrast morpheme with the help of the context.

4) 快耳且者, 真秦之声也。-----《谏逐客书》

'The music which amuses eyes and ears is the true music of the Qin State.' *The expostulation Letter to expel the guests*

5) 是芙蕖也者, 无一时一刻不适耳目之观。-----《芙蕖》

'It is the Lotus flowers that are fit for viewing with ears and eyes at any moment.' *Lotus*

Although “耳目” is a PCW in sentence 4) and 5), it has a different bias trend. In sentence 4), the bias direction is “耳” (ear), because the following words are to listen to “秦之声” (music of Qin), whereas “目” is the contrast morpheme; In sentence 5), the bias direction is “目” (eye), because the following word is to “观” (view) the Lotus, whereas “耳” is the contrast morpheme.

## 2.2. The location of the two morphemes in Modern Chinese PCW is fixed and what is before or after cannot be changed unlike in the ancient Chinese PCW

The position of the two word-formation morphemes is fixed in modern Chinese, while sometimes the ancient Chinese adjusts the position according to the need of expressing and rhythm.

6) 竹筒漆书科斗文字, 杂写经史, 与今本校验, 多有异同。-----《太平广记》

'When checking the tadpole characters written on bamboo with lacquer, which write about classics and histories promiscuously, we will find a lot of differences between the characters between today's books and them.' *Taiping Collections*

7) 各以其类族辨物之同异也。-----《朱子语类》

'It depends on the categories and families to tell the differences among objects.' *Zhuzi Language Categories*

8) 智者能知罪性空, 坦然不惧於生死。-----《祖堂集》

'Wiser people can know guilt and be empty of sex and calmly face death without fear.' *Zu Tang collection*

9) 亦以明死生之大, 匹夫之有重于社稷也。-----《五人墓碑记》

'And it is also used to indicate the significance of death, the ordinary people also play an important role in the country.' *Biography of Five People on tombstones.*

“异同”\“同异” in sentences 6) and 7) there are PCWs with the same bias direction of “异”; “生死”\“死生”, where as in sentence 8) and 9) there are PCWs with the same bias direction of “死”. It is thus clear that the location of the morphemes of ancient Chinese PCWs is less fixed than that of modern Chinese PCWs.

### 2.3. *Mostly the semantic-bias of synonymous PCWs directs to the former one*

Synonymous PCWs mostly constitute nouns representing specific things, and the semantic bias of such category is often the former morpheme, such as “衣裳(the upper clothes+ the trousers), 国家(nation + principality), 窗户(window + door). 妻子(wife + son), 人物(person + thing), 人马(person + house), 家庭(family + hall)”, and so on. Their semantic-bias is directed to “衣 the upper clothes, 国 nation, 窗 window, 妻 wife, 人 person, 家 family” respectively, and the meaning of the latter morpheme has disappeared.

### 2.4. *The semantic-bias of antonymous PCWs directs to language taboos*

Usually the morphemes of antonymous PCWs were once abstract nouns, adjectives and verbs in the ancient Chinese period, which implied subjective likes and dislikes. Their meanings are opposite and the semantic-bias of such category is often directed to language taboos.

They are “存亡(exist + death), 安危(safety + danger), 好歹(good + bad)”, “忘记(forget + remember)”, “死活(dead + alive)”. Although in different speech parts their semantic-bias is without exception directed toward the morphemes containing derogatory sense, i.e. “亡 death, 危 danger, 歹 bad, 忘 forget, 死 death”.

## 3. The culture, psychology and the semantic-bias of PCWs

What is the cause of the semantic-bias features of Modern Chinese PCWs? In fact, they represent some of the underlying psychology in Han Nation's culture.

### 3.1. *It reflects the thinking ways of the Han Nation, i.e. they differentiate what is primary from what is secondary and are particular about family relations and order*

Language is the material vehicle of thinking, so five thousand years of traditional Confucian ethics not only deep into the layer of Han Nation's ideology and psychology, but also affects the development of the entire Chinese language. Mencius<sup>2</sup> believes that the following moralities and rules of conduct can help in interpersonal relationships, i.e. on intimate affection of flesh and blood between father and son, the morality of courtesy and righteousness between the monarch and his subjects, fervent

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<sup>2</sup> Mencius (BC372–BC289), a thinker, politician and educator during the Warring States period. He was the Confucianism master after Confucius. Both of them are known as the “Confucius and Mencius”. He maintained and developed Confucianism, and in his *Mencius* he advocated the theory of “Benevolent Governance” and “good human nature”. His theory had a great impact on the Song Dynasty.

love between husband and wife but with different tasks, the order between the young and the old, and the morality of integrity between friends, which is the principle of human's conduct. These guidelines were extended to the Chinese vocabulary system, and the one reflected in the following: “君臣 ruler and subject, 父子 father and son, 夫妻 husband and wife, 兄弟 brothers, 姐妹 sisters” and so on. That is why the more important morpheme in the compound nouns is always put in the front of a PCW. For example, in the word “人物” (person), the latter morpheme is less important than the former one “人”. Although “物” also once referred to “人”. Here is a sentence from *The report of ten shames for not conquering* by Wei Zheng: “损己以利物。” and it means: *to lose something of yourself so as to facilitate the other people*. But later on this meaning disappeared gradually, and now it only refers to “objects” which are opposite to “person”. So its status is lowered, and the morpheme “物” (objects) is placed behind the “人” (person), which becomes a thorough contrast morpheme which lost the original meaning.

### 3.2. *It reflects the traditional cultural and psychological tendencies of purchasing happiness*

The composition of antonymous PCWs itself can be a proof of dialectic thinking in early Han Nation's culture and language, and their semantic bias shows the traditional cultural and psychological tendencies. People are inclined to kindness instead of evil, advantages instead of disadvantages, and they always yearn for truth, kindness and beauty.

A simple dialectical thought in ancient China goes as follows:

*Existence or non-existence, hard or easy, long or short, all these concepts complement each other.*

*Luck and Misfortune comes in turn.* Lao Tzu<sup>3</sup>

*Soft words win hard hearts.*

*It goes mutual transformation of yin and yang.* Book of Changes.

And the book *Sun Tzu on Art of War* explores the opposition and transformation of a series of war-related contradictions such as ourselves-enemies, subject-object, much-less, strong-weak, offend-defend, advance-retreat, victory-defeat and so forth. Based on this way of thinking, the antonymous PCWs generated as an important asset, because they directly include this dialectical philosophy and carry a language history and culture.

The semantic bias of antonymous PCWs reflect people's common psychology in their pursuit of happiness. People desire delight and health, happiness and prosper-

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<sup>3</sup> Lao Tzu (?BC580-?BC500) is the name of a legendary Taoist philosopher, the alternate title of the early Chinese text better known in the West as the Tao Te Ching, and the moniker of a deity in the pantheon of organized “religious Daoism” that arose during the later Han dynasty. Lao Zi is the Pinyin Romanization for the Chinese characters which mean “Old Master.”

ity, and they also desire to expel diseases, suffering, poverty and backwardness. The general tendency is to *pursue happiness and to avoid suffering*, which psychologically causes people to escape from using the taboo language. Although the semantic-bias is towards the bad side, people have been accustomed to put the good side in front of the expression. Thus it results in the effect of beating around the bush, objectively alleviating people's tension, which conforms to the good wishes of people like in: *turn ill luck into good*.

#### 4. Other Points

In modern Chinese some of the ancient Chinese PCWs extended and changed their meanings, and they are no longer PCWs now. The PCWs are “作息 (work + rest → daily routines), 成败 (success + failure → success or failure, 始终 (begin + finish → always) etc. They do not bias toward the meaning of one morpheme, and they convert into a meaning as a whole. For example, “作息” now refers to the timetable of work and rest, so we should pay attention in distinguishing them in the teaching of vocabulary items.

In addition, in the process of vocabulary development, some PCWs not only preserved the usage of ancient Chinese, but also increased the usage of modern Chinese and we should pay attention in distinguishing them. For example, the word “人马 (person + horse)” has two meanings in modern Chinese.

1) It refers to the army.

“全部人马安然渡过了长江”。

‘All troops had crossed the Yangtze River.’

2) It refers to the members of some collectivity.

“我们编辑部的人马比较整齐” (2002)

‘Members of our editorial office are in good order.’

In sentence one, the two morphemes “人” and “马” constitute a new meaning, and they mean “army”. While in the second sentence, we have to do with a PCW, “马” because it serves as a contrast morpheme.

#### 5. Conclusion

Modern Chinese PCWs evolved from the ancient Chinese PCWs, so there is a successive relationship between them. By comparison we find out that modern Chinese PCWs have some advantages in expressing explicit meanings as they have more definite bias direction and the location of the two morphemes is fixed, thus less likely to cause misunderstanding. And the semantic-bias features of modern Chinese PCWs consist in that mostly the semantic-bias of synonymous PCWs directs to the former, while the antonymous PCWs directs to the language taboos. The former feature reflects the thinking ways of Han Nation, i.e. to differentiate what is primary from what

is secondary and are particular about family relations and order. And the latter reflects the traditional cultural and psychological tendencies of purchasing happiness.

In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the introduction of the individual composition features of PCWs of the right time, can be very helpful to the students in terms of a better understanding and mastering the semantics lying behind the composition features of the PCWs, as they could draw adequate inferences about analogical situations.

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