

Exploring sound symbolism in Old Chinese

Introduction

I am interested in the direct relationship between sound and meaning in Old Chinese. In modern linguistics, the relationship between sound and meaning in language is predominantly considered an arbitrary one, a viewpoint that has been sustained by Saussure's first principle of linguistics, namely that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (Saussure 1966). Ever since Saussure, the idea that there is a direct relationship between sound and meaning in language, often described as 'sound symbolism,' has predominantly been placed outside of mainstream linguistics.

Although arguments for and against a direct relationship between sound and meaning in language have been debated for over two thousand years, the academic field of sound symbolism is a more recent phenomenon. Inspired by the comparative studies of languages undertaken by 19th century linguists, the beginning of the 20th century saw a range of studies in sound symbolism emerge in the work of linguists and anthropologists. Falling out of fashion with the rise of generative grammar, studies of sound symbolism began to take a more 'psychological' outlook with the rise of cognitive linguistics in later stages of the 20th century. This trend has continued into the present with many current studies on sound symbolism focusing on psycholinguistics. Studies often consist of experiments in which participants are asked which word 'feels' right for different semantic concepts.

My interest in sound symbolism is not founded in linguistics however, rather, it is an interest that has been piqued by studies in sinology and Old Chinese. Through my studies of ancient Chinese texts, especially the exegetical works of the Han dynasty, I have come to see that the relationship between sound and meaning plays an important role in the interpretation of works written in Old Chinese. I first came across this idea during my investigations into the phonetic elements of Chinese characters. Surprised at the degree of similar semantic meaning expressed by characters that share the same phonetic element, I delved further into literature around the topic and discovered that this relationship between the phonetic element of characters and meaning had been long studied by Chinese scholars, from the *youwenshuo* 右文说 that originated in the Song to the works of philological scholars in the Qing. Investigating further I began to explore literature concerning sound symbolism, especially Ohala's 'frequency code' (the correlation of words with high frequency sounds with smallness, and low frequency sounds with largeness) (Ohala 1995), and soon I began to see many examples of sound symbolism in Old Chinese. Contrasting terms of high and low frequency sounds such as 牙 (molar tooth – blunt)/ 齿 (front tooth – sharp), 左/右, 人/胡, 正/邪, 城/野 and 有/无 seemed to suggest that Old Chinese had a tendency to depict ideas associated with being small/sharp/refined/cultured/orthodox with high-frequency sounds while ideas of large/blunt/vulgar/barbaric/heterodox were correlated with low-frequency sounds. This pattern fits nearly all contemporary psycholinguistic studies on sound symbolism.

Significance

Exploring the sound symbolic nature of Old Chinese is significant on many fronts. One potential outcome is that if successful, such a study would provide further evidence of the existence of sound symbolism. However, personally, I believe that the value of this study would be greatest in the following two areas:

Firstly, this research will directly impact the way in which we can interpret ancient Chinese texts. Understood through a rubric of sound symbolism, Old Chinese words acquire additional layers of meanings in on top of their standard dictionary definitions. For example, looking at the concept of *wu* 无 as found in the Tao Te Ching from a sound symbolic perspective, the low frequency of the vowel hints at ideas of that which is heterodox, while the initial -m- suggests connotations of 'darkness' (The initial -m- in Old Chinese has long been noticed as symbolically conveying the semantic idea of darkness). In approaching ancient Chinese texts with an understanding of sound symbolism we can delve into ever richer levels of meaning and interpretation.

Secondly, explorations of sound symbolism in Old Chinese could potentially provide further evidence towards a theory of language monogenesis. Although linguistic approaches to exploring the origin of language focus on tracing the evolution of languages through comparison and the identification of language families, some linguists have suggested that primordial language was sound symbolic in nature and that it can be reconstructed by plotting the underlying semantic meaning of phonemes. Foster, who believed that the gestures of the mouth in speech articulation directly correlate to the meaning of the sound produced, has investigated the fundamental symbolic meaning of consonants and vowels in the search for the origins of language (Foster 1996, 1978). It is interesting to note that many of Foster's findings seem to correspond neatly with elements of sound symbolism found in Old Chinese, especially in the symbolic meanings of -m- and -w-.

The Gap

While the relationship between meaning and sound in Old Chinese has been the subject of numerous studies by scholars interested in etymologies and phonology, there are very few studies that look at the relationship of sound and meaning through an overtly sound symbolic lens. One reason for this is undoubtedly the low regard in which sound symbolism has been held by the majority of the linguistic community for the last century. However, more to the point, scholars such as Karlgren, Pulleyblank, Schuessler, Wang Li and Baxter have been predominantly interested in phonological reconstructions and the discovery of etymologies and word families in Old Chinese. In this way, their studies of the relationship between sound and meaning have been restricted by the framework they have subscribed to, namely that of words and word families. Studiously exploring diachronic relationships between words in the search for etymologies, as far as sound symbolism is concerned, they have perhaps 'missed the forest for the trees.' The result of this focus is that while we have a much greater understanding of Old Chinese etymology and phonology, we are still largely unaware of the wider correlations between sound and meaning in Old Chinese. Working on the strong foundations of these scholars, especially their phonological reconstructions, my research aims to explore the relationship between sound and meaning with the specific goal of searching for sound symbolism. Instead of a focus on word families and etymologies, I aim to cast the net wider, focusing on meaningful correlations between sound and meaning within semantic fields.

The Question

An effective research proposal on the study of sound symbolism in Old Chinese needs to be founded on a solid understanding of key the questions and problems that exist in this field. In an attempt to show how my research intends to deal with these issues, I have first presented my research question below, following which I provide an analysis of how this research question has been deliberately designed to deal with many of the questions and problems that commonly occur in studies relating to the sound of Old Chinese.

For this research proposal, my research question as it currently stands can be stated as the following:

Explore the relationship between sound and meaning in the semantic fields of *Shijing* rhyming words.

Understandably, this research question is still at an early phase of development and will obviously mature through further reading and research. It has been purposely constructed to deal with certain issues which are explained below.

Why Rhyming Words?

Given the importance of sound in studies of sound symbolism, it is imperative that a firm analysis of Old Chinese phonology is used in this study. Traditionally, reconstructing Old Chinese has involved categorising rhymes of the *Shijing* into distinct rhyme groups before increasing the groups by adding words that share the same phonetic element as the words in the rhyme groups. Diachronic comparisons with Middle Chinese are used to provide evidence that supports the particular grouping of words into different categories (In Old Chinese these categories are known as *yunbu* 韵部). This was the technique used by Qing dynasty philologists and remains an important part of modern-day reconstructions. However, as scholars increasingly become aware of the relationship between Chinese and other Sino-Tibetan languages, as well as Kam-Tai, Hmong-Mien and Austroasiatic, modern reconstructions are increasingly relying on comparisons between these languages as well as comparisons made with modern day Chinese dialects (Baxter and Sagart 2016). Unlike the categorisation of *Shijing* rhymes, many of these comparisons are often disputed by other scholars in the field, resulting in a variety of reconstruction hypotheses.

Old Chinese reconstructions find the greatest degree of variance in parts of words that do not form part of a rhyme, namely pre-initials, initials and some medials. This is because the parts of words that make up a rhyme, namely most vowels and word codas, are seen as being more definite due to their presence in *Shijing* rhymes. Although there are some discrepancies among scholar's phonological reconstructions of the rhyming parts of Old Chinese words, these differences are much smaller than those concerning initials and especially pre-initials.

With the aim of taking a more conservative approach to the study of sounds in Old Chinese, I intend to focus on the sound symbolic nature of the vowels and word codas that form part of word rhymes. Future work on the relationship of sound and meaning in regard to word initials is something that I believe should only be taken up once there is a more definitive consensus around how such sounds should be reconstructed.

Why the *Shijing*?

Used by scholars to study the phonology of Old Chinese for hundreds of years, the value of the *Shijing* in researching the relationship between sound and meaning in Old Chinese cannot be understated. However, apart from this, there are further reasons why it is useful to focus research of sound symbolism in Old Chinese on the poems that make up the *Shijing* corpus.

Firstly, I believe that it is important to situate the study of Old Chinese sound symbolism within the framework of semantic meanings given in a historical text as opposed to constructing relationships based on more artificial meanings found in dictionaries and exegetical texts. Another important reason is the need to ensure that the evidence used in this study remains within the domain of Old Chinese. While the *Shijing* is a text that is seen as an amalgamation of different poems that were written over a large period of time, there is a general consensus that the language of the *Shijing* is a type of Old Chinese. In contrast, although the analysis of the phonetic elements of characters is often used to give evidence of Old Chinese phonology, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain the date at which specific phonetic elements were introduced. Whether or not such phonetic elements reflect the sounds of Old Chinese varies and thus a systematic study of all phonetic elements to reveal sound symbolism in Old Chinese would not be practical.

Why semantic fields

It is my belief that many studies in sound symbolism have been restricted by their overt focus on words. Early studies often consisted of mass comparisons of basic vocabulary across a range of languages, however, these studies are liable to miss many elements of sound symbolism due to differences in naming practices. For example, comparisons of the word for 'moon' are not likely to find evidence of sound symbolism if comparing say, English 'moon' with the Spanish 'luna.' Such a comparison does not take into account the fact that the English word 'moon' is etymologically related to the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root *me- (conceptually related to measurement) while the Spanish luna derives from the PIE root *leuk- (related to ideas of light and brightness). Given this variation, sound symbolism should not be restricted to individual words, rather it should be investigated through the analysis of broader semantic fields.

Exactly how semantic fields will be defined in this study is a question that requires further conceptualisation, however, the general aim will be to ensure that they are wide enough to encompass a large range of semantically related words.

Literature Review

Arguments for and against sound symbolism in Old Chinese have taken place for over two thousand years and can be seen reflected in the *Zhengming* 正名 debates (especially as given in the *Xunzi*) that occurred during the Warring States period. Discussions were furthered by the investigations of philological scholars in the Qing who provided detailed research on the nature of the sound-meaning relationship in Old Chinese, with some scholars overtly proposing a sound symbolic hypotheses. The work of two Late Qing/Early Republic scholars Liu Ze (刘赧) and Liu Shipai (刘师培) on the nature of semantic similarities between rhyming words in Middle and Old Chinese is of particular interest in this research (Liu n.d.; Liu 1932).

Post-Saussure research focusing on Old Chinese sound symbolism has invariably be marked by a tentativeness to argue for a direct relationship between sound and meaning. Although scholars such as Pulleyblank and Schuessler cautiously point towards the possibility of evidence for sound symbolism, a focus on etymology and word families (Schuessler 2007; Pulleyblank 1973), as well as the phonetic reconstruction of Old Chinese, has led to sound symbolism being seen as an exception, outlier or even, as in the case of Jiang Shaoyu, a non-entity (Jiang 1992). Outside of etymological concerns, modern research on Chinese sound symbolism has followed a broad-brushed approach that aims to describe the phenomenon at a macro level. Examples are normally given for Modern Chinese and include studies on demonstrative pronouns and on the relationship between high tone

and the semantic meanings of small and intimate (D. 刘丹青 Liu and Chen 2008; Zhu 2004). One particularly interesting study is Gu Zhengkun's work on sound symbolism in which he maps diametrically opposed semantic categories into a 'Yin/Yang' framework (Gu 1995).

Recently, the rising legitimacy of sound symbolism in cognitive linguistics has led to a renewed interest in the relationship between sound and meaning in Old Chinese. This is evident in Smith's work on the reduplicative vocabulary in the *Shijing* in which he provides more detailed statistical evidence for sound symbolism as seen in the relationship between the meaning and reconstructed sounds of reduplicatives (dieyinci 叠音词) in the *Shijing* (Smith 2015). Cautious in his approach, Smith's data presents evidence for sound symbolism in Old Chinese with a focus primarily on main vowels, rhymes and final stops.

Study Design

In contrast to Smith's quantitative approach in which he explores sound symbolism in the *Shijing* through statistical evidence, I propose to undertake a qualitative approach, investigating the evidence for sound symbolism through an integrated analysis of ancient Chinese texts and other relevant archaeological and anthropological evidence. As this research will be primarily exploratory in nature, there will need to be a degree of flexibility within the structural design.

Method

In searching for evidence of sound symbolism in Old Chinese, I propose to follow a similar approach to that of Wang Li in his *Tongyuan Zidian* (同源字典), namely collecting data on the meaning of Old Chinese words from a large corpus of Chinese texts, especially the exegetical texts of the Han dynasty.

Dividing *Shijing* rhyming words into the 29 rhyming groups (*yunbu* 韵部) outlined by Wang Li, I will explore the meaning of words in these groups through an analysis of evidence in glosses and other ancient Chinese texts. The intention will be to see if these rhyming groups constitute observable semantic fields.

Sources

Primary evidence of *Shijing* rhyming words will, of course, come from the *Shijing* itself. I will primarily use the *Maoshi zhengyi* (毛诗正义) edition as found in Ruan Yuan's *Commentaries and explanations to the Thirteen Classics* (*Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏), however, as I am more interested in the rhymes of the *Shijing* as they existed in their original form than in the form in which they were transmitted, comparisons will be made with Wang Xianqian's *Shisanjia Yijishu* (诗三家义集疏) and more recent excavated texts that contain fragments of the *Shijing*.

Evidence of the rhyming patterns and rhyming groups in the *Shijing* will be taken from both Baxter's *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* and Wang Li's *Shijing Yundu* (诗经韵读).

Ancient Chinese exegetical texts including the *Erya* (尔雅), *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字), *Fangyan* (方言) and *Shiming* (释名)

Timeframe

In order to ensure that this project can be completed within the set timeframe, I believe that it may be necessary to only examine a subset of the 29 rhyming groups identified by Wang Li. This sub-set

would necessarily include those groups which I believe are likely to show strong evidence for sound symbolism and would likely include the following rhyming groups 之部, 耕部, 阳部, 鱼部, 幽部, 真部, 侵/谈部 and 辑/盍部.

Expected Outcomes

I believe that through my research I will be able to show that Old Chinese has greater elements of sound symbolism than has been previously accounted for. I expect that this sound symbolism will primarily take a form similar to that shown in modern studies of sound symbolism in cognitive linguistics, namely a tendency for words that represent ideas of small/sharp/refined/cultured/orthodox to be correlated with high frequency sounds and a propensity for words associated with ideas of large/blunt/vulgar/barbaric/heterodox to be correlated with low frequency sounds. Furthermore, I expect that words with -m- finals will be more likely to be associated within a semantic field of 'darkness' and 'in-betweenness' while words with -w- are likely to fall under the semantic fields of 'roundness' and 'cycles.'

I furthermore expect that many of the sound and meaning correlations that will be revealed throughout this study will complement many of the sound symbolic relationships determined by Foster in her work on the reconstruction of primordial language. In this way, I hope that my research may also play a part in furthering the evidence of language monogenesis.

Bibliography

- Baxter, William H, and Laurent Sagart. 2016. *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, Mary LeCron. 1978. "The Symbolic Structure of Primordial Language." In *Human Evolution: Biosocial Perspectives*, edited by Sherwood L. Washburn and Elizabeth R. McCown, 77–121. Menlo Park, Calif: Benjamin/Cummings Pub. Co.
- . 1996. "The Reconstruction of the Evolution of Human Spoken Language." In *Handbook of Human Symbolic Evolution*, edited by Andre Lock and Charles R. Peters (eds.), 747–775. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gu, Zhengkun 辜正坤. 1995. "人类语言音义同构现象与人类文化模式——兼论汉诗音象美." *北京大学学报(哲学社会科学版)*, no. 06: 87–95+108+128.
- Harbsmeier, Christoph. 2016. "Irrefutable Conjectures. A Review of William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese. A New Reconstruction*." *Monumenta Serica*.
- Jiang, Shaoyu 蒋绍愚. 1992. *古代汉语词汇纲要*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Karlgren, Bernhard. 1957. *Grammata Serica Recensa*. Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.
- Liu, Danqing 刘丹青, and Yujie 陈玉洁 Chen. 2008. "汉语指示词语音象似性的跨方言考察(上)." *当代语言学* 10 (4).
- Liu, Shipei 刘师培. n.d. "古韵同部之义多相近说." In *左盦集* 〈二〉, 第78页. 中国哲学书电子化计划. Accessed September 25, 2018.
<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=81811&page=78&remap=gb>.
- Liu, Ze 刘赧. 1932. "古声同纽之字义多相近说." *武汉大学文哲季刊* 2 (2).
- Ohala, John. 1995. "The Frequency Code Underlies the Sound-Symbolic Use of Voice Pitch." In *Sound Symbolism*, edited by John J. Ohala Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, 325–47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/10.1017/CBO9780511751806>.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin George. 1973. "Some New Hypotheses Concerning Word Families in Chinese." *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 1 (1): 111–25.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1966. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Wade Baskin, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schuessler, Axel. n.d. "What Are Cognates and What Are Variants in Chinese Word Families?" In *Historical Development of Chinese Language*, Papers from the Third International Conference on Sinology, Linguistics Section 225–45.
- . 2007. *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Smith, Jonathan. 2015. "Sound Symbolism in the Reduplicative Vocabulary of the Shijing." *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 2 (2): 258–85.
- Wang, Li 王力. 1980. *诗经韵读*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- . 2014a. *同源字典*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- . 2014b. *汉语语音史*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Wang, Xian 王显. 2011. 诗经韵谱. Beijing: The Commercial Press.

Wang, Xianqian 王先谦. 2011. 诗三家义集疏. Hunan: Yuelu chubanshe.

Zhu, Xiaonong 朱晓农. 2004. “亲密与高调——对小称调、女国音、美眉等语言现象的生物学解释.” 当代语言学 6 (3): 193–222.