

## The Semantic Function and Non-Substitutable of Chinese Characters

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### Abstract

Chinese character can not be replaced by any other writing forms, especially phonetic script. Comparing to the phonetic script characterized linear structure, Chinese character as a semantic script characterized square structure is more suitable for Chinese, which has many homophones.

**Key words:** Chinese character; Semantic function; Phonetic script

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinese character is regarded as a typical representative of semantic script, a different system from the phonetic script such as the Indo European language writing. Actually, The Chinese character is not a pure semantic system, because more than ninety percent of the contemporary common Chinese characters are of picto-phonetic characters (Qiu, 1998, p.151), which contain at least one component that hints the pronunciation of the whole Chinese character it belongs to. Borrowing homophonous characters is an important method of increasing the quantity of graphic symbol, which functions just as a phonetic symbol.

Essentially, the borrowed characters of Chinese characters are phonetic signs, and the difference between borrowed characters and phonetic string of letter is very little. For example, the common function word of classical Chinese “其” and the pronoun “之” are both borrowed characters. The original meaning of “其” is a dustpan, a tool. The graphic form of “其” is like a dustpan. As a function word, it is very difficult for the writer to create a pictographic symbol to refer to “其”. In this case, using a homophonous character to refer to the function word “其” is a good choice. As a function word of high frequency, the original meaning of “其” is forgotten gradually. The user added a graphic component “竹” referring to bamboo to the graphic symbol “其” to form a new picto-phonetic character “箕”, which contains phonetic component “其”. So, the term *semantic script* is not enough to fully generalize the feature of Chinese characters. What is the feature of Chinese character? How to look on the term *semantic script* for Chinese character?

### 1. THE INDISPENSABILITY OF THE SEMANTIC COMPONENT OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER

It doesn't mean that the term *semantic script* is of no value at all in referring to the Chinese characters, especially when distinguish Chinese character and phonetic script. Comparing to the typical phonetic script such as the writing of Indo-European family, semantic function is no doubt a notable feature of Chinese character, although all the modern Chinese characters are not semantic scripts.

The ancient Chinese script about 3000 years ago such as oracle bone inscription and bronze inscription is a kind of typical semantic script, including pictograph, syssemantograph and deictograph. The classical Chinese graphology classifies and analyzes the ancient Chinese scripts with the theory of Six Scripts. In the system of

the theory, the pictograph is decrypted as a picture on the specific things. For example, in oracle bone inscription, the respective figure of “日” “月” “牛” “羊” is an imitation of a sun, a moon, a cattle and a sheep. The syssemantographs in ancient Chinese script include at least two semantic graphic components. For example, the character of oracle bone inscription “寇” is composed by three graphic components, “宀” “元” “攴”, which respectively reflects a house, a head of a man and a hand with a stick. The three components are composed to show a situation that a man in the house is attacked on the head by a robber who sneaks into the house with a stick. The counterpart of “寇” in English is *robbery*. The deictograph in ancient Chinese script is not as much as the pictograph and syssemantograph. The deictic symbol “丿” in the deictograph “刃” prompts the blade of a knife. The pictograph, syssemantograph and deictograph in ancient Chinese script are three types of typical semantic script, which is in the majority of ancient Chinese script.

The picot-phonetic characters, which are in the minority in ancient Chinese script and most of modern Chinese characters, are composed by a semantic component and a phonetic component. The complex process of the production of picot-phonetic characters is not the focus of the paper. Generally, most of the picot-phonetic characters come from the process of adding a semantic component to a borrowed character. In the long process of developing, Chinese character actually has the opportunity of transforming from semantic symbol to phonetic symbol. In oracle bone inscription, the place names are written by borrowed homophonous characters, including pictograph, syssemantograph. The borrowed characters function just as a symbol of transcription, and have no difference from phonetic script. But finally, the borrowed characters are added respective semantic side components related to mean to make the meaning of the graphic symbol more clearly, leading the surge of quantity of picot-phonetic characters. The fact shows that method of phonetic transcription is not the first choice for Chinese character as a record of language. The appearance element of meaning such as semantic component is indispensable in the writing of Chinese.

The indispensability of the semantic components coincides with the syllable structure of Chinese, one character·one syllable·one ideational meaning (Xu, 2005, p.384). The structure determines that the limited population of syllable will be used to sign plenty of vocabulary of spoken language. Averagely, one syllable represents seven homophones in Putonghua of modern Chinese language (Lü, 2004, p.31). In *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the syllable yi represents ninety-one homophones (Xu, 2005, 386).

The contradiction between the high quantity of homophones and the limited increasing of the number of Chinese characters leads the wide use of borrowing

method, an easy and effective way of improving efficiency of the graphic symbols. The high frequency of borrowing of characters will inevitably make one character has several sense items, and this will bring about difficulties of recognizing when reading. The most direct and effective way of solving the problem is differencing the functions of the character through adding relative semantic symbol to the borrowed character to make its meaning more clear. Plenty of borrowed characters who function as phonetic symbols become picto-phonetic characters.

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF DISTINCTION IS THE CORE OF THE SEMANTIC FEATURE OF THE MODERN CHINESE CHARACTER

Actually, for modern Chinese character, either semantogram or semantic graphic component, the core function is the distinctive feature of the graphic symbols, and not the pictographic feature. For example, “牛” doesn’t look like a cow or cattle, but the character has intuitive distinctive feature comparing to “羊”. The distinctive feature of a Chinese character is more important than its pictographic feature. For the user, the highlight is not the similarity between the Chinese character and the thing it referring to, but the distinction between a Chinese character and another similar one.

The correlation between the semantic side component and the picot-phonetic character is very loose (Qiu, 1998, p.167). When a borrowed symbol is used to bear several different meanings, a significance-related sign is inclined to be added to the borrowed symbol beside. The significance-related sign functions as a distinctive mark rather than a semantic symbol. Few semantic side components are identical to the Chinese characters they belong to in meaning. Essentially, semantic side component is the annotation for the sense items which share the same graphic symbol.

The strokes and structures of modern Chinese character have changed dramatically during more than thirty thousands years comparing to the oracle bone inscription. The linear strokes which predominate ancient Chinese script have developed into stipple strokes. The evolution weakened the pictographic feature of Chinese character so greatly that the real pictographs have vanished in modern Chinese characters. It doesn’t mean that the fundamental property of Chinese character has changed. The structure and figure of modern Chinese character is still the most suitable writing style for the syllable structure of Chinese. At a certain length, the structure of Chinese character which consists of various basic strokes such as dots and lines can offer more distinctive features than phonetic script which consists of limited number of letters. The structure of

Chinese character makes it possible to distinguish the homophonous characters from figures most effectively. The function of offering enough intuitive feature of distinction should be regarded as a kind of semantic function. For syllable structure of Chinese, the square structure formation of basic character has irreplaceable virtue. The words of phonetic script are formed through changing the amount or sequence of combination of the letters. The phonetic script make distinctions between homophones by changing the length of alphabetic string or the sequence of the letters. For example, the pronunciation of the English word *right* and *write* is the same, but the different spelling allows the reader can make an immediate distinction between the two words. The method of spelling homophones with different letters is similar to that of adding semantic component to another graphic symbol. The homophones in English are much fewer than those in Chinese. If the modern Chinese characters are taken placed by the Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, which was developed to replace the Chinese character originally and approved by the fifth meeting of the first National People's Congress in February 1958, the spelling of homophones will be the biggest headache for the writer and reader. For example, the syllable *yì* represents ninety-one words (Xu, 2005, p.386). But the Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet can't provide adequate and effective way to discriminatively spell the homophones.

## SUMMARY

**The Chinese character can not be transformed into phonetic script.** The Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet is developed to replace the Chinese character, but it has been proved of be infeasible. The failure of the experiment should not be blamed for the lacks of precision of the scheme, but for the misplacement of connection of track to Indo-European language, which is of phonetic script.

Solving the problem by changing the amount and sequence of the letter string or adding distinctive signs to the structure of the syllable will produce a more complex system of writing than modern Chinese character. What's more, the alphabetization of Chinese character will completely eliminate the limited semantic motivation of the graphic symbol, which is helpful to comprehension and memory more or less. The Chinese characters characterized by square structure have an advantage over the phonetic script characterized by linear structure on the distinctive function. Yuen-ren Chao, a famous linguist, has interpreted the feature of Chinese and Chinese character with a classical Chinese passage.

石shí室shì诗shī士shì施shī氏shì, 嗜shì狮shī, 誓shì食shí十shí狮shī。施shī氏shì时shí时shí适shì市shì视shì狮shī。十shí时shí, 适shì十shí狮shī适shì市shì。是shì时shí, 适shì施shī氏shì适shì市shì。施shī氏shì视shì是shì十shí狮shī, 恃shì矢shǐ势shì, 使shǐ是shì十shí狮shī逝shì世shì。施shī氏shì拾shī是shì十shí狮shī尸shī, 适shì石shí室shì。石shí室shì湿shī, 施shī氏shì使shǐ侍shì拭shì石shí室shì。石shí室shì拭shì, 施shī氏shì始shǐ试shì食shí是shì十shí狮shī。食shí时shí, 始shǐ识shí是shì十shí狮shī, 实shí十shí石shí狮shī尸shī。试shì释shì是shì事shì。

It's not difficult for a reader of learning about classical Chinese, while it is very difficult when the passage is written with a kind of phonetic script. The structure of Chinese character, which is made of dots and lines, plays an irreplaceable function in distinction of the graphic symbols. It is unpractical to design a phonetic script system of writing to replace the modern Chinese characters.

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