The Basic Ideas of the Sinogram-Based Theory by Tongqiang Xu

SHEN Hongyi[a],*

[a]Post doctor, Institute of Chinese language and literature, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

The Sinogram-based theory by Tongqiang Xu is the most prominent achievement of Chinese language studies in recent years. The theory emphasizes that the Chinese language studies must be based on the linguistic facts from Chinese instead of Indo-European languages. The sinograms are the basic structural units of Chinese, just as words are that of Indo-European languages. As the coding system of reality, Chinese adopts the mode of taking sinograms but not words as the basic units, and this is the ultimate reason for the fundamental difference between Chinese and Indo-European languages. The controversial theory is still non-mainstream because of the lack of precision and the conventional thinking of others.

Key words: Sinogram-based theory; Chinese; Indo-European languages

INTRODUCTION

The focus of the traditional studies of Chinese is graphology, semantics and phonetics, and the respective three branches, classical Chinese graphology, traditional classic Chinese semantics and historical phonology, and all of these constitute the principal part of traditional studies of Chinese. At the end of 19th century, with the influence of the western thoughts, the publication of the book on grammar of Chinese *Ma Shi Wen Tong* by Jianzhong Ma who has studied in Paris brings about an original grammar system of Chinese and leads the traditional studies of Chinese to the way of referring to the research tradition of Indo-European languages. During more than 100 years, The Chinese grammar system including the teaching system is the reproduction of the theory of the Indo-European languages. A large number of contradictions between the linguistic theory and the linguistic facts puzzle the linguists of Chinese, that nurtures the self-examination on the question that whether it is correct to take the features of the Indo-European languages as universal or not. The way of starting from the so-called universals based on Indo-European languages and tying to find the individual features of Chinese has been proved of infeasible. So, the way of starting from the individual features of Chinese to revise and perfect the so-called universals based on Indo-European languages is advocated by some linguists of Chinese.

Recently, more and more linguists of Chinese begin to rethink the predicament of the lack of efficacy in analyzing the structure of Chinese with the current linguistic theories. The word-based grammar system of Indo-European languages is deemed invalid to establish a complete grammar system of Chinese. Some essential differences between Chinese and Indo-European languages such as the lack of morphological changes in Chinese determine the fact that Chinese can not be describe with the ready-made word-based grammar system. So the grammarians of Chinese try to reconstruct a new grammar system which is based on and suitable for the features of grammar of Chinese. The new grammar system is named after Sinogram-based theory for it takes the Sinograms of Chinese instead of words of Indo-European languages as the basic structural units of Chinese.

1. THE BASIC IDEA Ⅰ: SINOGRAM IS THE BASIC STRUCTURAL UNIT OF CHINESE

Actually, before be recognized as a new theory of grammar, the argument of emphasizing the importance of Sinogram instead of so-called word in Chinese language studies has been putted forward by some linguistics. The *Rhythm and Structure in Chinese Word Conception* published in 1975 by Yuanren Chao, has a most explicit and comprehensive elaboration on the nature and function of the Chinese sinogram so far. We copy the paragraph to highlight the importance and particularity of the sinogram in the structure of Chinese.

If we observe a fairly large number of utterances in a language like English, for illustration, concerning small parts of utterances and compare them with similar utterance in Chinese, I think the name—for I want to avoid the use of the word word as applied to Chinese for the time being—the name tzǔ⁴字 would play a corresponding part that the word word plays in English; that is, on most occasions in which an English-speaking person speaks of words, a Chinese would speak of tzǔ⁴. But this is far from saying that the structure character of tzǔ⁴ is the same, or ever nearly the same, as that of a word in English. It is like the equating of orange to chü². tzǔ 橘子 in conventional translation. Structurally chü². tzǔ is a tangerine. It is a different sort of animal—that is, plant —from an orange. But since the tangerine is by far the commonest citrus fruit in China, as oranges are in some other countries, the name chü². tzǔ has come to play the part of "the commonly used citrus fruit." So the word tzǔ⁴—or strictly we should say the tzǔ⁴ tzǔ⁴—is simply that common, short, constituent part of utterances which is taught in schools, explained in dictionaries, written as separate unit characters, and above all most frequent talked about when one becomes at all conscious of small change of language. In fact, when a Chinese who knows a little English talks in Chinese about English words, each English word is usually referred to, rightly or wrongly, as a tzǔ⁴. What is a tzǔ⁴? A tzǔ⁴ is a monosyllable and usually, at least for the literate, has a meaning. We are not ready to call it a word, because it has important structural difference from elements of other language that are called words by English speakers and writers.……It may be useful to analyze the Chinese language from the viewpoint of an occidental linguist and identify such units as the structural word, as distinguished on the one hand from the word-syllable or tzǔ⁴ and on the other hand from phrase and sentences. I think it is useful to do so, and I have been trying to do so. But this is not the Chinese way of thinking, at least not until recent times, which don't count. In Chinese conceptions, tzǔ⁴ is the central theme, tzǔ⁴ in rather varying senses is a subsidiary theme, and rhythm gives the language style (Wu, 2006, pp.986-987, 1006-1007).

The paper *Rhythm and Structure in Chinese Word Conceptions* was written at the age of 82 by Yuanren Chao, who had studied languages including Chinese and other Indo-European languages for about 60 years. Chao is not the only one who believe it is sinogram but not word should be took as the basic unit of Chinese. Shuxiang Lü has said that the basic unit of Chinese vocabulary is sinogram, which is not the equivalence of the letter in occidental languages (Lü, 2004). Not only in teaching activities, but also in academic researches, the term *word* is not a indispensable concept for Chinese. The words are ready-made in European languages but not in Chinese (Lü, 2004). The western linguistic theories have dominated the research of Chinese for more than one hundred years, so the arguments for reassessing the value of sinogram as the basic unit in research cause few effect in the academic circle of Chinese.

The publication of *language: The structure principle and research methodology of the semantic-oriented language*, the integration achievements around the Sinogram-based theory by Tongqiang Xu is the first real practice of studying Chinese on Chinese. In the work, Tongqiang Xu comprehensively discusses the status of sinogram in Chinese. Sinogram, which is regarded as a kind of symbol to Chinese as the letters to Indo-European languages, actually is not only the basic unit of written language, but also that of utterance. It is difficult to find the corresponding part of sinogram in English, just as it is difficult to find the corresponding part of word in Chinese. Being a system of written symbol, that is most noticeable for the researchers, is not all the functions of the sinograms. According to Tongqiang Xu**,** as a basic unit of psychological reality for the community of Chinese, sinogram is the junction of speech sound, semanteme, grammar and word stock, and this determines the central position of sinograms in Chinese researches (Xu, 2014, p.14). The sharp conflicts between the occidental grammar theories and Chinese facts result from the wrong grafting, which takes the so-called word introduced from occidental linguistics as the basic unit of Chinese language studies (Ibid., p.17).

In the Sinogram-based theory, sinogram, as an academic concept, is defined as the minimum structural unit with semantic motivation. Most of the ancient sinograms are of monosyllable, and some compound words featured with alliterating or rhyme are of disyllable. The inconsistency indicates that the objective criterion for minimum structural units is not the singleness of syllable. Owing to the majority of the monosyllable structure of ancient sinograms, most of researchers accept the basic assumption that minimum unit of conception is of monosyllable in Chinese. In contemporary Chinese, the pattern of disyllabic and polysyllabic structure carrying motivation has replaced that of monosyllable structure carrying motivation, and the transformation allows people identify the disyllabic and polysyllabic structures with

the monosyllable structures in psychological reality (Ibid.). The sinogram which consists of one character, one syllable and one ideational meaning are the basic juncture of the linguistic elements (Xu, 2008, p.129). The further statement on the features of the basic units of language is published later. Tongqiang Xu, the advocator of Sinogram-based theory, points out that the basic units of languages which connect phonology and semanteme, featured with ready-made property, discreteness or closed-class, and psychological reality of the speech community (Xu, 1998, p.11). In Chinese the basic units which possess the three features are sinograms and in Indo-European languages are words and sentences. For a sinogram, one syllable correlates to one meaning, while for a word, the direct relevance between syllable and meaning doesn't exit.

The direct correlation between syllable and ideational meaning characterizes the mono-syllabic languages, and on that the basic units of languages are formed. In Chinese, the basic units are sinograms characterized by one-to-one correspondence of sinogram, syllable and conception. The *sinogram* is defined as the structural unit of one syllable associating with one conception. As the core or base of structure of Chinese, sinogram is the perspective through which the syntax rules of Chinese can be found (Xu, 2008, p.26). Trinity is the ultimate summary on sinogram. The trinity of sinogram refers to the three identities of sinogram, auditory sensation unit, written unit and semantic unit, that forms the structure foundation of Chinese culture (Ibid., p.89). The description and explanation on the constructional rules of the basic units are the main components of grammar studies (Li, 2008, p.135).

2. THE BASIC IDEA Ⅱ: LANGUAGE IS THE CODING SYSTEM OF REALITY

Tongqiang Xu defines language as a coding system of reality. The huge proposition is used to interpret the structure of the language, the relevance between language and society and the evolution of languag (Xu, 2005, p.14). Coding is a process of converting the variety of things and the relevancies between things in the objective realities into symbols, which are the marks of the phenomenon of objective realities. People use the symbols as a tool of communication to understand the realities (Ibid., p.15).

In the coding system of reality, the basic unit of the code is word in English and sinogram in Chinese. It is a simplification of a important issue that the sinogram is the symbol to record language. As a kind of symbol to record language, why sinograms can not be used to record Indo-European languages such as English? The answer is the total difference of structural features between Indo-European languages and Chinese. So written language is not only the question of symbol to record language, but

that of language itself (Xu, 2013, p.251).

Essentially, encoding mechanism is the mode of processing of the relevance between phonetics and semantics. For Chinese, a monosyllabic sinogram, as the intersection of phonetics, semantics, vocabulary and grammar (Ibid., p.251), is actually a ready-made code which functions as a basic unit of coding system. While for English, the encoding process is divided into two steps. The first step is to produce morphemes, a basic but semi-finished unit that can not be used independently to communicate directly. The second step is to combine a word with the morphemes, and this is the coding of reality. For Chinese, the formation of the basic unit of coding system, sinogram, is synchronous with the formation of motivation. For English, the formation of motivation occurs only after the composition of the basic unit, morphemes, has been finished (Ibid., p.255).

The difference between the two modes of coding is the ultimate reason for the fundamental difference of the structure and research tradition between the two kinds of languages. For Chinese, motivation forms from sinogram, and the situation determines the sinogram-centered semantic research tradition. For Indo-European languages, motivation forms from the composition of morphemes, and the situation determines the rule-centered lexical and syntactic research tradition (Ibid., p. 256).

The difference between the two modes of coding brings profound impact on the structure of languages. In Chinese, the basic unit of coding is the monosyllabic sinogram, whose short pronunciation and simple rules of phonological combination get the monosyllable function so fully that plenty of codes are produced. The huge number of codes, the basic units of coding, or sinograms, function as roots, and the situation allows the rules of word-building to be very simple (Ibid., 256). On the contrary, In Indo-European languages, the step-by-step implementation of coding allows the quantity of words increase hundreds of times through various kinds of rules of composition with the relatively limited number of morphemes, that results in a very complex system of word-building, which is the focus of research for linguists in a long time (Xu, 2013, p.257)

In the argumentation, Tongqiang Xu tries to theoretically make a point that Chinese is of semantic or lexical grammar while Indo-European languages are of inflectional grammar (Xu, 2008, p.42), that determines the different method from that of Indo-European languages in the study of Chinese. The point becomes more definite and specific in *An Introduction to Syntax on Sinogram-based Theory of Chinese*. In the work, vocabulary and grammar are both coding of combinations of sound and sense. The vocabulary is of unit of conceptual structures, and grammar is of structure of sentences. The focus of grammar research is the relevance of the structural units and the rules drew from the vocabulary. The high abstract degree of the rules makes it look like grammatical

explanation, while low abstract degree of the rules makes it look more like lexical explanation. So, the clear distinction between lexical grammar and inflectional grammar is non-existent. Chinese, as a kind of mono-syllabic language, is a typical example whose grammar system is featured with constructional rules about lexical units. Indo-European languages, as multi-syllabic languages, are typical examples whose grammar system characterizes with constructional rules of sentences and brings lexical rules into syntactic rules (Ibid., p.43). The difference in principle between Chinese and Indo-European languages determines the divergence in theory and method.

Besides the basic theory, Tongqiang Xu has conducted a series of research cases on Chinese language according to the ideas and methods of the Sinogram-based theory. Due to space limitations, we will not get into more details of the research.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The Sinogram-based theory by Tongqiang Xu is the most prominent achievement of Chinese language studies in recent years. The theory re-understands the core status of sinograms in structure of Chinese and confirms that the sinograms instead of words are the basic structural units and central topics. Tongqiang Xu refuses to regard the features of Indo-European languages as universals of languages and insists that the study of linguistics must be based on the specific features of individual languages (Ibid., p.1)

The general tendency in Chinese researches is to look the individual features of Endo-European languages as universals of languages, so the controversial Sinogram-

based theory is still non-mainstream, although more and more researchers have realized that the study of Chinese must flush out the old routine. The situation that the grammar system of Chinese is established referring to that of Indo-European languages, and the fact that the system of Sinogram-based theory is of imprecision to some extent, determine the long way for the Sinogram-based theory.

REFERENCES

Li, J. (2008). *A summary on the sinogram-based theory by Tongqiang Xu*. The Seeker: Festschrifts for Tongqiang Xu. Peking: The Commercial Press.

Lü, S. X. (2004). *Volume of essays by Shuxiang Lü* (Volume 4). Peking: The Commercial Press.

Tongqiang Xu, T. Q. (2005). *Foundations of Linguistics: A course book*. Peking: Peking University Press.

Tongqiang Xu, T. Q. (2008). *An introduction to syntax on sinogram-based theory of Chinese*. Jinan, China: Shandong Education Press.

Wu, Z. J., & Zhao, X. N. (2006). *Linguistic essays by Yuanren Chao*. Peking: The Commercial Press.

Xu, T. Q. (1998). A theory on sinogram——Attached to the discussion on basic units of languages in three aspects: Distinguishing standards, essential features and the relevance between the basic units of languages and the construction of linguistic theories. *Linguistic Researches,* (3).

Xu, T. Q. (2013). *A preliminary discussion about Chinese research methodology*. Peking: The Commercial Press.

Xu, T. Q. (2014). *Language: The structure principle and research methodology of the semantic-oriented language*. Peking: The Commercial Press.