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Denominal verbs in Old Chinese

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Abstract

It is very common to see that some nouns surface as verbs in Old Chinese. These kinds of nouns are the sources of both Chinese denominal verbs and multi-category words. This article systemically analyses denominal verbs in Old Chinese. Being a quantitative study, we classify twenty-one classic documents¹ based on two criteria: (1) depending on their syntactic distributions, their syntactic characteristics are summarized; (2) generalization of their categories according to the semantic roles of the origin nouns. Furthermore, this research is examined from the perspective of language typology. By comparing denominal verbs in Old Chinese, Modern Chinese and the English language, we discover the typological sense of Old Chinese denominal verbs.

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Keywords: Old Chinese; Denominal verb; Syntactic distribution; Semantic role; Typology

1. Introduction

Very common of note is that some nouns surface as verbs in Old Chinese (11th–3rd c. BC). Many scholars, notably Chen (1922), Lü (1957), Wang (1981), Cai (1985), Wang (1989), Zhang (1994, 1999, 2005), Jiang (2000), Chi (2009) and Yang (2013) have discussed the phenomenon of a word changing its word class and functions as a member of another word class. However, they mainly focus on a generalized answer to the question of when nouns appear as verbs; Very few have touched upon the core characteristics, intrinsic basis, motivations and typological values of Old Chinese denominal verbs. In this article, we systemically discuss the denominal verbs found in twenty-one Old Chinese documents. Thus, we summarize the conditions of when nouns surface as verbs depending on their syntactic distributions and then generalize the categories depending on the semantic roles of the origin nouns. We also view our research from the perspective of linguistic typology. By comparing denominal verbs in Old Chinese, Modern Chinese (14th–18th c. AD) and the English language, we discover the topological sense of Old Chinese denominal verbs as well.

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¹ Our corpus is based on twenty-one documents from Pre-Qin dynasty to West-Han dynasty which include Zhouyi (11thc.-771 BC), Shangshu (770–476BC), Shijing (770–476 BC), Zhouli (475–221 BC), Yili (403–221 BC), Liji(475BC-202AD),Zuozhuan (403–389 BC), Gongyangzhuan (156–143 BC), Guliangzhuan (around 201 BC), Lunyu (479–400 BC), Mengzi (372–289 BC), Guanzi (475 BC-188A D), Mozi (475–221 BC), Zhuangzi (475–221 BC), Xunzi (about 325–238 BC), Hanfeizi (about 275–233 BC), Lüshichunqiu (243–239 BC), Zhanguoec (221–209 BC), Huainanzi (188–87 BC), Shiji (about 91 BC), Lunheng (25–97 AD).

In this article, origin nouns refer to nouns which become verbs later. It is a term as opposed to denominal verbs which refer to verbs derived from origin nouns. Take the following two sentences in English for example;

- (1) I like red color.
- (2) The barber colors her hair.

The word 'color' is used in both of the above two sentences. However, in example (1), 'color' is a noun and in example (2), 'color' is a verb derived from the noun. Thus, we call the former an origin noun and the latter a denominal verb.

2. Syntactic distributions and characteristics of Old Chinese denominal verbs

It is well known that Old Chinese is short of morphology. It is very difficult to ascertain the category of a word by its morphology. Furthermore, it is subjective to make judgements depending on a researcher's linguistic sense or on the meanings of a word. Therefore, we begin by classifying Chinese denominal verbs according to their syntactic distributions.

Generally speaking, in a non-copular sentence, if a noun is placed in the position of a predicate and there is another noun or noun phrase preceding it, the noun in the predicate position usually changes from an origin noun to a denominal verb.

In this research, Old Chinese denominal verbs are divided into three groups depending on: 1. whether they take a supplementary and; 2. if the supplementary is pre-verbal or post-verbal.²

2.1. *Noun*₁ + *Noun*₂

- (3) 齊侯 疥。 (左傳·昭公二十年)
Qihou jie. (Zuo Zhuan: Zhaogong ershinian)
king of Qi scabies
'The king of the country Qi suffers from scabies.'
- (4) 八 人 衰經。 (左傳·哀公二年)
ba ren cuidie. (ZuoZhuan: Aigong ernian)
eight person mourning suit.
'Eight persons wear mourning suits.'

The characteristic of this sentence pattern is that denominal verbs appear following the subjects and no other syntactic constituents are used around them. Take sentence (4) for example. In this sentence, the denominal verb 'cuidie' (mourning suit) is after the subject 'baren' (eight persons). There are no other syntactic constituents around it.

2.2. *Noun*₁ + *Adverb* + *Noun*₂

- (5) 叔孫 為 孟 鐘。 (左傳·昭公四年)³
Shusun wei Meng zhong. (Zuo Zhuan: Zhaogong sinian)
Shusun for Meng bell
'Shusun makes a bell for Meng.'
- (6) 若 我 用 璫翠玉瓊, 鄭 必 不 火。 (左傳·昭公十七年)
ruo wo yong guanjiayuzan, Zheng bi not huo. (Zuo Zhuan: Zhaogong shiqinian)
if I use jade Zheng certainly not fire
'If I use jades, the country of Zheng will certainly not suffer from an outbreak of fire.'

² When a denominal verb occurs with both an adverbial and a complement, we assign it to the category involving complements.

³ This explanation is found in the book of Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi.

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