

# A Research on the Criterion of "Phonologic Borrowing" in Ancient Chinese Language

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**Abstract:** On the basis of the existing research, this paper puts forward four criteria for judging the relation of "phonologic borrowing" in ancient Chinese documents, including phonetic criterion, word meaning criterion, grammatical criterion and exemplification material.

**Keywords:** Phonologic borrowing, Criterion, Ancient Chinese.

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon that ancient Chinese language recorded ancient Chinese words with the same or similar phonetic forms intentionally or unintentionally in the process of language recording is generally known as the "phonologic borrowing" (通假) phenomenon of ancient Chinese characters. This is also known as the phenomenon of "using characters" (用字) in ancient Chinese language, which is composed of many groups of ancient Chinese characters with the relationship of "phonologic borrowing", also involves pronunciation, meaning, grammar and other subsystems.

Based on the research of Chinese scholars, this paper discusses the criteria of the relationship of "phonologic borrowing".

## 2. Research Summary

### 2.1. Discussion of Chinese scholars on the Nature of "Phonologic Borrowing"

There are three stages in the study of "phonologic borrowing": the first stage is from the Han Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, which focuses on revealing the phenomenon of "phonologic borrowing" in ancient documents (古代文献); The second stage is the Qing Dynasty, The research focus is on using the new knowledge of phonology (音韵学) to correct the wrong interpretation of the predecessors and discuss the meaning, cause and scope of the phenomenon of "phonologic borrowing". The third stage is from the 20th century to the present, the main content of the study is the exact meaning, historical significance, epochal character, hierarchy of "phonologic borrowing"[1].

From the historical summary of the research on "phonologic borrowing", researchers can find that the understanding of the nature of "phonologic borrowing" phenomenon is not clear enough in previous studies. Two scholars, Ruxiong Zhong and Juan Hu, discussed the study of "phonologic borrowing" by Chinese scholars from ancient times to the present, which is very valuable work. In their paper, they discuss the essential characteristics of "phonologic borrowing", which is a way to find the original characters of misspellings in ancient documents by means of phonetic equivalence[2]. This view is unique, but it is of little reference value. Because this view has broadened the scope of research on the phenomenon.

Generally speaking, each glyph of ancient Chinese characters corresponds to a word, and this correspondence is relatively fixed. If a character in ancient Chinese literature does not represent the usual corresponding word, but represents another word with the same pronunciation or similar to this character, then this situation is "phonologic borrowing". The word may have an etymological connection to the word that does not normally correspond to it, or it may have no semantic connection at all but be phonetically identical or similar[3].

For more discussion, please refer to *Ancient Chinese "Pseudo-word" Summary*[4]. Some Chinese scholars will confuse "phonologic borrowing" with "Loangraphs" (假借字) when discussing "phonologic borrowing". This paper holds that "Loangraphs" is one of the basic structure types of ancient Chinese characters, which is not suitable to be involved with "phonologic borrowing" as a phenomenon of using Chinese characters. Therefore, this article does not discuss "Loangraphs". If the reader is interested in "Loangraphs", he or she may refer to chapters 6 and 9 of *Chinese writing*[5].

### 2.2. Discussion of Chinese scholars on the Criterion of Judging "Phonologic Borrowing"

Li Wang proposed that each group of Chinese characters in the relationship of "phonologic borrowing" must have the same or similar pronunciation[6]. That is to say, for Chinese characters that are identified as "phonologic borrowing", their consonants should be in the same place of articulation, and the simple or compound vowel in the Chinese syllables should be similar. It should be noted that quite a few of the vowels in ancient Chinese syllables would combine with consonants to form closed syllables. At this time, the syllables of these Chinese characters are required to have the same or similar main vowels, and the same or corresponding relationship with the consonants after vowels. The claim is the principle of "phonologic borrowing" generally accepted by Chinese scholars.

Yun Mai's opinion is a refinement of the foregoing argument. In his opinion, if a group of Chinese characters is to be identified as having "phonologic borrowing" relationship, then this group of Chinese characters should meet three conditions: First, the pronunciation of each other in this group of Chinese characters should be supported by phonology. Secondly, the best interpretation should be chosen

for the meanings represented by this group of Chinese characters. Third, there should be supporting ancient documents materials as evidence.[7] Among Chinese scholars, Yun Mai's views are clear and valuable.

In addition to all kinds of studies mentioned above, some scholars discuss the standard of "phonologic borrowing" relationship from the two aspects of pronunciation and Illustration[8]. This paper is also a valuable research document.

### 3. Criterion and Illustration

Our research shows that the phenomenon of "phonologic borrowing" is a complex linguistic phenomenon involving both language and characters. Therefore, if we discuss the judgment of the relation of "phonologic borrowing", we should first start from each subsystem of language, that is to say, we should establish the standards of pronunciation, word meaning and grammar. Finally, this judgment should be supported by ancient Chinese documents.

#### 3.1. The Criterion of Pronunciation

The criterion of pronunciation is the primary criterion to judge the relationship of "phonologic borrowing".The criterion of pronunciation can be embodied in two ways: first, a set of characters have a common or equivalent "phonetic element"(音符); Second, a group of characters does not have a common or equivalent phonetic element, but phonetics research considers the group of words to be identical or similar in pronunciation.

(1) a.器械功則伐而不費(管子·七法)

qì xiè gōng zé fá ér bù fèi(guǎn zǐ,chapter qī fā)

功—solid—adj.—[kuŋ55] = [character—the sense of a word—part-of-speech—Modern Chinese pronunciation]

b.械用兵革攻完便利者強(管子·議兵)

xiè yòng bīng gé gōng wán biàn lì zhě qiáng(guǎn zǐ,chapter yì bīng)

攻—solid—adj.—[kuŋ55]

(2) a.大功小功(儀禮·喪服)

dà gōng xiǎo gōng (yí lǐ,chapter sāng fú)

功—(大功、小功)mourning apparel—noun—[kuŋ55]

b.大紅小紅(史記·孝文本紀)

dà gōng xiǎo gōng (shǐ jì,chapter xiào wén běn jì)

紅—(大紅、小紅)mourning apparel—noun—[xuŋ35]

(3) a.子貢(name, 荀子·子道)

zǐ gòng(guǎn zǐ,chapter zǐ dào)

貢—name—[kuŋ51]

b.子贛(name, 荀子·大略)

zǐ gàn(guǎn zǐ,chapter dà lüè)

贛—name—[kan51]

The first set of examples is identical in ancient pronunciation, even in modern Chinese pronunciation. The second group of examples also had partial differences in ancient pronunciation, which was reflected in the different parts of consonants.The third group of examples had partial differences in ancient pronunciation, in that vowels were different but similar.

#### 3.2. The Criterion of Semantic

The criterion of semantic is the simplest one, which is in the secondary position among the four standards. This criterion requires that a group of characters with the same or similar pronunciation have the same and similar meanings in

ancient Chinese documents of the same historical period.

(4) a.故先王之法，立天子不使諸侯疑焉，立諸侯不使大夫疑焉，立適子不使庶孽疑焉。疑生爭，爭生亂。是故諸侯失位則天下亂，大夫無等則朝廷亂，妻妾不分則家室亂，適孽無別則宗族亂。(呂氏春秋·慎勢)

gù xiān wáng zhī fǎ, lì tiān zǐ bù shǐ zhū hóu yí yān, lì zhū hóu bù shǐ dà fū yí yān, lì dí zǐ bù shǐ shù niè yí yān。 yí shēng zhēng, zhēng shēng luàn。 shì gù zhū hóu shī wèi zé tiān xià luàn, dà fū wú dèng zé zhāo tíng luàn, qī qiè bù fēn zé jiā shì luàn, dí niè wú bié zé zōng zú luàn。(lǚ shì chūn qiū,chapter shèn shì)

疑—?—verb—[i214]

b.故曰：孽有擬適之子，配有擬妻之妾，廷有擬相之臣，臣有擬主之寵，此四者國之所危也。故曰：內寵並后，外寵貳政，枝子配適，大臣擬主，亂之道也。故《周記》曰：“無尊妾而卑妻，無孽適子而尊小枝，無尊嬖臣而匹上卿，無尊大臣以擬其主也。”四擬者破，則上無意，下無怪也。四擬不破，則隕身滅國矣。(韓非子·說疑)

gù yuē: niè yǒu nǐ dí zhī zǐ, pèi yǒu nǐ qī zhī qiè, tíng yǒu nǐ xiāng zhī chén, chén yǒu nǐ zhǔ zhī chǒng, cǐ sì zhè guó zhī suǒ wēi yě。 gù yuē: nèi chǒng bìng hòu, wài chǒng èr zhèng, zhī zǐ pèi dí, dà chén nǐ zhǔ, luàn zhī dào yě。 gù 《zhōu jì》 yuē: “wú zūn qiè ér bēi qī, wú niè dí zǐ ér zūn xiǎo zhī, wú zūn bì chén ér pǐ shàng qīng, wú zūn dà chén yǐ nǐ qí zhǔ yě。” sì nǐ zhě pò, zé shàng wú yì, xià wú guài yě。 sì nǐ bù pò, zé yǔn shēn miè guó yǐ。(hán fēi zǐ,chapter shuō yí)

擬—equate—name—[ni214]

These two examples refer to two characters having the same phonetic element "疑". But these two characters usually mean different things. The character "疑" often means "doubt", while the character "擬" often means "equate". But putting the character "疑" in example 4a would be incomprehensible. The meaning of the sentences can be well explained by putting the frequently-used meaning of the character into the two examples. Although there are differences in the pronunciation of the two characters, since they use the same phonetic element, we consider this situation to be consonant with the laws of phonetics. So this set of examples uses the character "疑" to represent the common meaning of the character "擬". That is to say, the character "疑" and the character "擬" have a "phonologic borrowing"relationship.

#### 3.3. The Criterion of Grammar

The criterion of grammar is a pivotal criterion, but it is often ignored in the past research. Grammatical standards require that a group of words with identical sounds and meanings act as the same sentence elements in different sentences. If the grammatical status of character A and B is not the same, it can not be considered that A and B have a "phonologic borrowing" relationship. Because what this actually means is that the A and B words are record different words. therefore, this criterion is interdependent with The criterion of semantic.

(5) a.且無用(史記·游俠列傳)

qiě wú yòng (shǐ jì, chapter yóu xiá liè zhuàn)

無用—not have to—not-verb—[u35.yŋ51]

b.且毋庸(漢書·游俠傳)

qiě wú yōng (hàn shū, chapter yóu xiá zhuàn)

毋庸—not have to—not-verb—[u35.yŋ55]

(6) a.今予惟恭行天之罰(尚書·甘誓)

jīn yǔ wéi gōng xíng tiān zhī fá (shàng shū, chapter gān shì)

恭—respectfully—adv.—[kuŋ55]

b.予共行天之罰也(墨子·明鬼上)

yǔ gōng xíng tiān zhī fá (mò zǐ, chapter míng guǐ shàng)

共—respectfully—adv.—[kuŋ55]

c.今予發維共行天之罰(史記·夏本紀)

jīn yǔ fā wéi gōng xíng tiān zhī fá (shǐ jì, chapter xià běn jì)

共—respectfully—adv.—[kuŋ55]

(7) a.帝庸作歌(尚書·益稷)

dì yōng zuò gē (shàng shū, yì jì)

庸—conjunction—[yŋ55]

b.帝用此作歌(史記·夏本紀)

dì yòng cǐ zuò gē (shǐ jì, chapter xià běn jì)

用此—verb-object phrase—[yŋ51ts'ɿ214]

The two characters in case 5 record a negative construction, although their literal form is different, but they have the same pronunciation, meaning, and grammatical status. Example 6 is similar to Example 5. The differences between the three sentences are very small, and their grammatical structure is basically the same. The difference between the two sentences in Case 7 is also small, but they have different grammatical structures. So case 7 is not a qualified set of examples.

### 3.4. Exemplification Materials

The exemplification materials is not necessary to judgment of "phonologic borrowing" relation. But the more evidence you have, the more reliable the reasoning becomes. The exemplification materials here mainly refer to the materials of "variant characters"(异文). "variant characters" generally refers to the use of different characters in ancient Chinese documents to record the same semantic expression.

There are generally three kinds of "variant characters". The first is to record the same language unit with a set of phonetic identical or similar characters. This is the case with most of the examples we've mentioned earlier. Second, a group of characters that record the same language unit is semantically

identical or similar, and these characters are not pronounced the same. The third is to record a miswritten character in a group of characters of the same language unit. Only the first kind is qualified material, the other two can not be used as reliable evidence.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, this study determines four criteria to judge the relationship of "phonologic borrowing", including pronunciation, Semantic, grammar and exemplification material. This is a preliminary study on the judgment of the relation of "phonologic borrowing" in ancient Chinese literature and puts forward an operable standard. We can say for sure that these four criteria cannot be applied to every case suspected of "phonologic borrowing" in ancient Chinese literature, but they should be able to be applied to the vast majority of cases.

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