

Speech act verbs and the development of Chinese characters

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1. Introduction

Examples of characters with MOUTH and SAY radicals

MOUTH character

cYA01) 1. to bite 2. to bark 3. to formulate, articulate, pronounce

SAY character

hSHUO 1. to say, speak 2. to explain 3. lore, theory

2. Thesis

In this paper we want to argue that one group of related characters within the Chinese writing system was developed to represent a peculiarity of Chinese and many Western languages, speech act verbs, and that most of these are indeed denoted by members of this group of characters. Our thesis comes in two versions:

The strong version of our thesis would be that SAY characters were made specifically to represent all and only speech act verbs. While this version can be easily disproved (cf. TO VISIT), we think that the weak version holds: The overwhelming majority of combinations of SAY characters denote speech act verbs (or aspects thereof) AND, vice versa, an overwhelming

majority of speech act verbs is denoted by (combinations of) SAY characters.

Finally, the transfer to Japanese, a language which originally had few speech act verbs is considered.

In this paper we proceed from language philosophic and pragmatic considerations to bring some light to the mysteries of the development of the Chinese writing system. For a start, we may ask the following questions:

1. Although there is a radical for actions having to do with the MOUTH, why is there another one, SAY?
2. Are there systematic differences between the realms of characters built with these two radicals?
3. If the differences are systematic, do members of the separate classes have a clearly distinguished function? In this case, the arbitrariness in the relationship between the characters and their meaning would be reduced considerably. Do these characters, beyond their "purely linguistic" meaning share a common social function?

On our way to seeking an answer to these questions, we will tackle the only case of related radicals in the Chinese writing system and try to show how one part of writing development helped solving a problem of social functions by providing a fairly consistent class of characters for one special part of social life usually called speech acts.

Two types of data are available:

1. "Isolated", "observational" data from dictionaries. We will use these data, which are already filtered, i.e. researched by way of observation, ordering, categorization, etc., by virtue of being in a dictionary, to arrive at our theses.
 2. "Context data" from texts. These will not be considered in this paper, but these data are to be used to prove or refute the theses in this paper.
- Observation gives us the following general data:
- There is a radical meaning WORD, SAY, etc.
 - There is a large number of characters using, i.e. derived from SAY (numbers see below).
 - For most of these characters, the meaning given is related to speech act verbs as introduced in part 2 below. Although there is no, and very probably never was, a one to one relationship, i.e. all and only SAY characters denote speech act verbs, a rate of 3/5 is too high to be completely accidental.

Of course, there are many other ways to construct characters for speech act verbs, some of which even have become more important for word formation than the ones we discuss.

Also, we do not consider, how much these characters are used today. The present writing of speech act verbs is determined by other factors. For one thing, presently two-character words are highly preferred. Also some characters have moved out of their radicals, so that the history is somewhat obscured²). Still, there is a large number of speech act verbs written with characters derived from SAY, and this gives us hints as to which of them were resistant enough to survive, and thus conserve history.

This means (1) that in the present we get the smallest number of such characters with speech act meaning so far, and (2) there were many more before, but these will have to be researched by specialists.

For building hypotheses as in this paper, the first step is a dictionary research of MOUTH and SAY characters, as well as an attempt at a reasonable classification, partly in comparison with other languages (Chinese vs. English, German, etc.). A second step later on would include the comparison of texts and translations. A third, for technical reasons final, step should consider historical changes within Chinese.

In this paper, we use the following terminology:

A radical (e.g. HAND, MOUTH, STONE) is that part under which to look up a character in a Chinese dictionary (bushou). Characters (e.g. those given in 0.1 above) consist of the radical plus some more strokes, other radicals etc. and usually have one or a couple of meanings, one or more pronunciations, and one or more tones, with the radical usually loosely indicating an area of meaning (cf. Mueller-Yokota (1994)). In the literature, these are often called ideophones. Combinations of characters (e.g. cJIErDA to answer, to explain) are very common in Chinese at present, but will have to be left out of consideration in this paper.

We here deal with topics concerning various areas within linguistics. We may not be able to pay due tribute to all related developments. On the other hand, no paper seems to have touched the thoughts presented here, at least not in internationally published form (computer search sept. 1995). We are not specialists in either of the areas concerned, i.e. philosophy of language or Chinese linguistics or theory of writing. Thus the whole paper has the character of proposing theses later to be proven extensively or refuted by specialists in the respective fields. At this point we will also not join in their discussion.

We can, at this preliminary stage, only take a look at the whole situation as it can be seen from the present. During history, a lot of things have changed. For example, some characters have moved out of their radicals into the realm of others, especially after the recent writing reform: cf. fHU, to guard, to take care of, from SAY to HAND. We can only take a look from the present, but since most of the characters still carry their history covertly with them, we think the situation can be made clear enough.³⁾

No one hundred percent safe interpretations can be given at this point, but we hope to show the direction. Since we are only at the start of this research, the discussion has to be kept somewhat general here.

Historically everything will be much more complicated than we can tell here. Ideally, the meaning changes of a large number of characters through different times and e.g. types of situations would have to be researched. This we have to leave for further research (for individual characters cf. e.g. Morohashi 1984-6).

3. Speech act theory

The main merit of speech act theory is to have brought the social importance of linguistic action back into the focus of scientific research (Heeschen 1980). Problems arise, when we consider lexicalizations for such

social acting, since "die explicit performativen Verben...ein europaeischer Sonderfall (sind)" explicit performative verbs are a peculiarity of European languages (Heeschen 1980:264). There is, however, one more language, Chinese, which historically had and still has a wide variety of speech act verbs, and this even shows in a special part of the writing system, which we will consider here.

3.1. Theoretical aspects

In this part we give a short overview of some important points in the context of speech acts and correspondingly, speech act verbs.

"Am Beispiel der indirekten Sprechakte, dem Prüfstein aller Sprechakttheorie, wird deutlich, daß nur ein "semantischer" Ansatz, der von der Bedeutung der Sprechaktverben und anderer performativer Ausdrücke ausgeht, in der Lage ist, das ganze Spektrum sprachlichen Handelns hinreichend zu erklären und zu systematisieren" Burkhardt (1986:100).

"Starting from the example of indirect speech acts, the testing block of all speech act theories, it becomes clear that only a semantic approach which starts with the meanings of the speech act verbs and other performative expressions, is able to sufficiently explain and systematise the whole spectrum of human linguistic acting".

According to Searle a speech act contains an utterance act, an illocutionary, a propositional and a perlocutionary act. We will not go into this here.

In one of the most recent definitions of speech act, Burkhardt (1986:31-2) defines:

"Sprechakte sind konventionelle Formen realisierende, sozial relevante Handlungen, die sich durch Äußerung von Sprechzeichen vollziehen und so innerhalb von Kommunikationssituationen intersubjektiv gültige Tatsachen schaffen. Mit Hilfe von Äußerungen wird etwas "getan und nicht bloß gesagt".

"Soziale Akte sind Resultate symbolischer Äußerungen, durch die unter Interaktanten Ansprüche und Verbindlichkeiten erzeugt werden....Die unmittelbare Hervorbringung des je aktspezifischen Verhältnisses von Anspruch und Verbindlichkeit durch Äußerung eines konventionellen Zeichens oder einer nach konventionellen Regeln gebildeten Zeichenkombination, das ist es, was soziale Akte bzw. Sprechakte von allen anderen Handlungen und Aktivitäten unterscheidet".

"Speech acts are socially relevant actions, which realize conventional forms. They are performed by uttering linguistic signs and thus create intersubjectively valid facts within communication situations. In doing utterances, something is "done and not just said" (cf. Austin).

"Social Acts are results of symbolic utterances, by which demands and obligations are created between the interactants....It is just this immediate generation of the individually act-specific relationship between demands and obligations by uttering a conventional sign or a sign combination shaped according to conventional rules which differentiates social acts and speech acts from all other actions and acting".

Concerning obligation and commitment, the following seems to hold: