Study of the “Xian(先)” of Oracle-bone Inscription “Xian Gao Zu Liao Jiu(先高祖牢酒)”

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Abstract

The “xian(先)” of oracle-bone inscription “xian gao zu liao jiu(先高祖牢酒)”, Mr. Zhang Yujin thinks that is a verb. In this paper, by studying on the pragmatic of election inscriptions, and comparing with similar inscriptions, we think it should be an adverb.

Keywords: Xian(先), part of speech, pragmatic, election inscriptions

1. Problem Introduction

In Mr. Zhang Yujin’s The Meaning and Usage of Inscriptions Which Indicates the Time Relationship of Two Things(2003), when it discusses about “xian(先)”, there are such examples:

(1) The oracle-bone inscription: A. 先高祖牢酒。
B. 惠河牢先酒。 (《合集》32308)

Chinese Pinyin: A. Xian gaozu liao jiu.
B. Hui he liao xian jiu. (Heji32308)

Idiomatic translation: A. We should firstly sacrifice in the way of Jiu before sacrificing to the ancestor Gaozu in the way of Liao?
B. We should firstly sacrifice in the way of Jiu before sacrificing to God of river in the way of Liao? (Heji 32308)

Mr. Zhang thinks “xian(先)” is a verb in sentence (1) A. However, the word “xian(先)” in sentence (1) B should be seen as an adverb. And Mr. Zhang thinks this pair of inscriptions talks about putting the wine offering for Gao-zu ahead will be better or putting the wine offering for the God of river ahead will be better.

Then, when Mr. Shen Pei discusses adverb’s position in Studying for Word Order of Oracle Inscriptions of Yin Dynasty (1992), he follows Mr. Zhang’s argument.

We believe that Mr. Zhang Yujin’s argument about “xian(先)” in sentence (1) A being a verb seems questionable. It should also be an adverb like “xian(先)” in sentence (1) B. To clarify the part of speech of “xian(先)” in sentence (1) A, you must first figure out the syntactic structure of sentence (1) B, and then come in to discuss the part of speech of “xian(先)” in sentence (1) A. I will discuss this question detailed in following essay, and learn from experts by it.

2. About “Xian Jiu (先酒)”

“Jiu (酒)” is a common offering name in oracle inscriptions and it is a kind of auxiliary worship which is often held together with other sacrifices. Mr. Li Lixin (2011) believes that “jiao(jiu) is initially held for enjoying entertainment from playing drums, and then usually refers to a kind of worship ceremony which is for entertaining God by music. As an offering made to the God by music, wine worship is used extensively in Shang Dynasty and it should be held simultaneously in many sacrificial occasions. For example, when 伐(fa)、祔(fu)、岁(sui)、誓(guan)、 сочет(su)、彤(ron)、勲(bao)、赭(zhe)、组(zu)、 Hao(xie)、燎(liao)、品(pin)、祭(yu)、 祝(bao)、祭(ji)、 雍(yong)、告(gao)are carried out, wine worship will be held simultaneously in most cases.” For example:

(2) The oracle-bone inscription: 丁巳卜：惠宜酒?
Chinese Pinyin: Ding si bu: hui yi jiu?
Ding si bu: hui jin yue jiu yi? (Heji 32216)

Idiomatic translation: Making cracks on Dingsi day, we can sacrifice in ways of Yi and Jiu?
Making cracks on Dingsi day, we can sacrifice in ways of Yi and Jiu in this month? (Heji 32216)

(3) The oracle-bone inscription: 惠己卯酒求?
惠庚辰酒求? (《合集》32216)

Chinese Pinyin: Hui ji mao jiu qiu?
Hui gen geng chen jiu qiu? (Heji 34501)

Idiomatic translation: It will be unfortunate to sacrifice on Jimao day?
It will be unfortunate to sacrifice on Gengchen day? (Heji 34501)

However, the phrase “xian jiu (先酒)” is very common in inscriptions. Referring to Class Code of Oracle Inscriptions of Yin Ruins(1989), we can find it contains altogether thirty-nine pieces of inscriptions. For example:

(4) The oracle-bone inscription: 惠母先酒?
惠兄先酒?
惠父先酒? (《合集》27489)

Chinese Pinyin: Hui mu xian jiu?
Hui xiong xian jiu?
Hui fu xian jiu? (Heji 27489)

Idiomatic translation: We should sacrifice to Mother in the way of Jiu in the first place?
We should sacrifice to Brother in the way of Jiu in the first place?
We should sacrifice to Father in the way of Jiu in the first place? (Heji 27489)

(5) The oracle-bone inscription: 惠升伐先酒，兹用?
升伐，惠今日甲酒?
于乙卯酒升伐? (《合集》32252)

Chinese Pinyin: Hui sheng fa xian jiu,zi yong?
Sheng fa,hui jin ri jia jiu?
Yu yi mao jiu sheng fa? (Heji 32252)

Idiomatic translation: We should firstly sacrifice in the way of Jiu before in the ways of Sheng and Fa, and use the result of this divining?
It is on this Jia day to sacrifice in the way of Jiu for sacrificing in the ways of Sheng and Fa?
It is on Yimao day to sacrifice in the way of Jiu for sacrificing in the ways of Sheng and Fa? (Heji 32252)

Otherwise, there also are “xian she (先射), “xian ta(涉)” and “xian she (先涉)” in inscriptions. For example:

(6) The oracle-bone inscription: 王惠兕兕?
弥襄兕先射，其若?
王惠兕兕先射，无灾?
弥襄兕先射，其若? (《合集》28407)

Chinese Pinyin: Wang hui si si?
Bi xiang si xian she,qi ruo?
Wang hui er si xian she,wu zai?
Bi er si xian she,qi ruo? (Heji 28407)
Idiomatic translation: The king should shoot the rhinoceros at some place?
   It is fortunate if the King does not first shooting the rhinoceros which are at Xiang?
   It has not calamity if the King first shoot the rhinoceros which are at Er?
   It is fortunate if the King does not first shooting the rhinoceros which are at Er? (Heji 28407)

(7)The oracle-bone inscription: 乙亥卜, 王先卜丙岁透申, 兹用? (《合集》27164)
Chinese Pinyin: Yi hai bu:wang xian tab u bing sui nai shen,zi yong? (Heji 27164)
Idiomatic translation: Crack-making on Yihai day, the King would sacrifice to the ancestor Waibing in the way of Ta before sacrificing in the way of Sui, then doing them again? using the result of this divining. (Heji 27164)

(8)The oracle-bone inscription: 庚子卜, 王先卜, 令子商先涉羌于河?
庚子卜, 王先卜, 令子商先涉羌于河? (《合集》536)
Idiomatic translation: Crack-making on Gengzi day, Que divined: The King should order the son Shang first get Qiang people cross the river?
Crack-making on Gengzi day, Que divined: The King should not order the son Shang first get Qiang people cross the river? (Heji 536)

That is to say, the structure “xian (先) + verb” is very common in inscriptions. Thus, “xian (先)” and “jiu (酒)” in sentence (1)B are an unity which has close semantic structure. “Xian (先)” is used to modify “jiu (酒)”. Therefore, it is absolutely right that Mr.Zhang Yujin treats “xian (先)” in sentence (1)B as an adverb.

3. About “Hui (惠)”
“Hui (惠)” is frequently discussed by predecessors. Mr. Guan Xiechu says in Grammar Studying for Oracle Inscriptions of Yin Ruins (1953): “The predicates of those sentences are transitive verbs. When object is placed before the transitive verb, there must be a marking preposition “hui (惠)” or “wei (唯)”. Mr. Zhang Yujin (1988) says: “ ‘Hui (惠)” and ‘wei (唯)” should be relegated to model adverbs, because they don’t have certain meaning and only refer to some kind of tone.” “Through the analyses for mental structure and information structure of ‘hui (惠)’-sentences, we know that the part after ‘hui (惠)” is usually the focus and always refers to new information. Thus, we can say that ‘hui (惠)” in inscriptions is the auxiliary marker of focus and new information. ” “If the object of verb is the focus and ‘hui (惠)” and ‘wei (唯)” are used as the marker, the object can be only placed before the verb and ‘hui (惠)” and ‘wei (唯)” should be put before the object.” We agree with Mr. Zhang’s opinion, because object preposing of inscriptions do not have to use “hui (惠)” and “wei (唯)” as the marker. For instance, the preposing of pronominal object in negative sentences does not need to use “hui (惠)” and “wei (唯)” as the marker. For example:

(9)The oracle-bone inscription: 贞, 帝不我旱? (《合集》10173 正)
Chinese Pinyin: Zhen,di bu wo han? (Heji 10173)
Idiomatic translation: To divine: the god should not bring drought calamity to me? (Heji 10173)

(10)The oracle-bone inscription: 贞, 帝不我其受佑? (《合集》6272)
Chinese Pinyin: Zhen,di bu wo qi shou you? (Heji 6272)
Idiomatic translationTo divine: if we do not fight against Gongfang, the god will not bring fortune to me? (Heji 6272)

The above two pieces of inscriptions both are object preposing of negative sentence, but there is no “hui (惠)” or “wei (唯)” being the marker.

Mr. Shen Pei (1992) says “When people in Shang Dynasty were doing practice divination, they tended to take positive-negative inscriptions or other elective inscriptions (“election inscription” in following). The focus of inscriptions can be found out through the comparison for contrary inscriptions (sometimes being over two pieces of pair contrary inscriptions).” Focus is a term involved in pragmatics. It refers to the point of comment and also the highlight of new information. In fact, it is also one of expressive points. That is to say, contrary inscriptions and election inscriptions make the question stand out. For example:
(11)The oracle-bone inscription: 其告妣辛，惠衞？

惠羊？(《合集》27557)

Chinese Pinyin: Qi gao bi xin, hui zhi?
Hui yang? (Heji 27557)

Idiomatic translation: We should use pigs to sacrifice to the deceased mother Xin?

We should use sheep to sacrifice to the deceased mother Xin? (Heji 27557)

The above inscription belongs to election inscription. The election inscription asks: Holding worship for Bi Xin(妣辛), pig and sheep, which will be better? Apparently, pig and sheep are the point of the question and also the focus of inscription.

The inscription Mr. Zhang Yujin cited is a pair of election inscription. According to above discussion, we can know that “he liao (河尞)” in sentence (1) B is the focus of inscription. Therefore, “hui(惠)” chose as the marker, “he liao (河尞)” is put before the verb phrase “xian jiu (先酒)”. If sentence (1) B is restored into normal order, it should be “xian jiu he liao (先酒河尞)”. Now, the syntactic structure of sentence (1) B is clear.

4. The Part of Speech of “Xian (先)” In Sentence(1) A

Let’s see a pair of election inscriptions first:

(12)The oracle-bone inscription: a.戊辰卜:其示于妣己,先妣己示?

b.惠父己示先父?(《合集》27412)

Chinese Pinyin: a. Wu chen bu:qi shi yu bi ji,xian ta bi ji shi?

b. Hui fu ji shi xian ta? (Heji 27412)

Idiomatic translation: a. Crack-making on Wuchen day, we should first sacrifice in the way of Ta during sacrificing to the deceased mother Ji?

b. We should first sacrifice to the deceased father Ji in the way of Ta? (Heji 27412)

The syntactic structure of inscription (12) b is same with that of sentence (1) B. The normal order of sentence (12) b should be “xian ta fu ji shi(先父己示)”. And the election inscription (12)a which is corresponding to inscription (12) b is “Wu chen bu:qi shi yu bi ji,xian ta bi ji shi (戊辰卜: 其示于妣己, 先妣己示)”. According to that, the election inscription which is corresponding to inscription (1)B is “xian jiu gao zu liao(先酒高祖尞)”, while it is “xian gao zu liao jiu(先高祖尞酒)”. We believe that putting “gao zu liao(高祖尞) before “jiu(酒)” is to make the focus stand out. And there is another problem: Why don’t put “bi ji shi(妣己示)” in sentence (12) a before “ta(父)” ? We think that is because “qi shi yu bi ji(其示于妣己)” has been mentioned before. “bi ji shi(妣己示)” in “xian ta bi ji shi(先父己示)” is not new information but old. Therefore, there is no need to mention. There is another problem: Why don’t use “hui (惠)” or “wei (唯)” to mark “xian gao zu liao jiu(先高祖尞酒)” ? We believe that is because not all focuses of inscriptions need to be marked by “hui (惠)” or “wei(唯)”. For example:

(13)The oracle-bone inscription: 辛未卜，王一月敦，受佑?

乙亥卜，生月王敦，受佑?

丙子卜，王二月敦，受佑? (《合集》20510)

Chinese Pinyin: Xin wei bu: wang yi yue dun yong, shou you?
Yi hai bu: sheng yue wang dun, shou you?
Bing zi bu: wang er yue dun yong, shou you? (Heji 20510)

Idiomatic translation: Crack-making on Xinwei day, if the King fights against Yong in January, he will be of fortune?
Crack-making on Yihai day, if the King fights against Yong during next month, he will be of fortune?
Crack-making on Bingzi day, if the King fights against Yong in February, he will be of fortune? (Heji 20510)

The above inscription putting time noun “January(一月)” and “February(二月)” between subject and predicate is to make its focus stand out. And the focus of inscription in here is not marked by “hui (惠)” or “wei(唯)”. This point has been discussed by Mr. Shen Pei (1992).

Therefore, we believe that “xian gao zu liao jiu(先高祖尞酒)” is actually “xian jiu gao zu liao(先酒高祖尞)”.

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However, in order to make the focus stand out, it places “gao zu liao(高祖寮)” before “jiu(酒)”. “Xian(先)” still has close semantic relationship with “jiu(酒)”, and its part of speech is same with “先” in sentence (1)B, also being an adverb.

Otherwise, we also consulted books and found out such two groups of inscriptions:

(14)The oracle-bone inscription: □河□[先][酒]?  
先高祖寮酒? (《合集》32307)

Chinese Pinyin: □he □[xian][jiu]?  
Xian gao zu liao jiu? (Heji 32307)

Idiomatic translation: We should sacrifice to the god of the rivers in the way of Jiu before sacrificing in other way?

We should sacrifice to the ancestor Gaozu in the way of Jiu before sacrificing in the way of the Liao? (Heji 32307)

(15)The oracle-bone inscription: 先庚岁酒?  
先祖乙岁酒? (《合集》32532)

Chinese Pinyin: Xian geng sui jiu?  
Xian zu yi sui jiu? (Heji 32532)

Idiomatic translation: We should sacrifice to the ancestor Geng in the way of Jiu before sacrificing in the way of Sui?

We should sacrifice to the ancestor Zuyi in the way of Jiu before sacrificing in the way of Sui? (Heji 32532)

Among them, inscription (14) and inscription (1) are the same oracle-bone inscription. The sentence patterns of inscription (15) and inscription (1) are absolutely same. It at least shows that inscription (1) has not been wrong carved.

5. Conclusion

For the particularity of the nature of oracle inscriptions, the certain aspects of its language also have some characteristics differing from later Chinese. Especially, worship verbs of inscriptions are a complex system, and there are many language phenomena which are different from later Chinese. If we attempt to explain the linguistic phenomenon simply by means of syntax, we can’t get reasonable explanations for a lot of problems. In this aspect, we believe that pragmatics perhaps can provide us a new way of thinking and give some problems more reasonable explanations. As for now, although some scholars have made beneficial attempts, such as Mr. Zhang Yujin, Mr. Shen Pei, Mr. Zheng Jie and so on, what we have done in this aspect is still not enough. How to better use the theory of pragmatics to explain some language phenomena of inscriptions? It needs more scholars to explore together.

Abbreviation

Heji Jiaguwen Heji. 《甲骨文合集》

References


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