



Universität Zürich
Ostasiatisches Seminar, Abteilung Sinologie

Zürichbergstrasse 4
CH-8032 Zürich
Tel. +41 1 634 31 80
Fax +41 1 634 49 21
behr@oas.uzh.ch
www.ostasien.uzh.ch

Professor Dr. Wolfgang Behr
Lehrstuhl Sinologie
(Traditionelles China)

Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Filozofická fakulta
Ústav Dálného východu
Jazyky zemí Asie a Afriky

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Report on the Doctoral Dissertation
“Word-class Flexibility in Classical Chinese:
Verbal and Adverbial Uses of Nouns“
by Lukáš Zádřapa

Dear colleagues,

I am happy to file this reference on LUKÁŠ ZÁDRAPA’s (henceforth: LZ) doctoral dissertation, currently submitted for examination at your esteemed faculty. To make this clear right away: this is a thoroughly impressive piece of scholarship, well-organized, concise, thought-provoking, consistently self-critical and methodologically conscious. It keeps just the right balance between a data-driven “bottom-up” approach and the theoretical insights needed not only to categorize the data in a convincing and very innovative fashion (chapters VI and VII), but to formulate questions of great import to typological and theoretical linguistics. Despite narrowing down the focus to the seemingly somewhat marginal phenomenon of verbal and adverbial usages of nouns, it offers by way of a kind of prolegomena (chap. V) no less than the most sophisticated treatment in any language of one of the most long-standing issues in Chinese linguistics, and, indeed, Chinese philosophy of language, namely the problem of word-class assignment in a language assumed to display an isolating typology. Other issues, such as the syntax of phrasal nominalization, markedness theory, and the role of polysemy in lexicology, are also treated in a way which could have easily ushered in specialised articles of great validity to the linguistic community at large. Let it be clear, then, that if I offer a few critical remarks and note down several irritations in the following, it is in the spirit of appreciative critique of the great deal I have learned through this densely argued dissertation.



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The introduction (chap. I) and the chapter on “Historical backgrounds” (chap. II) provide the historical and terminological overview needed for an understanding of the current state of affairs in Chinese studies of what is referred to as the “*huóyòng* 活用” (HY) phenomenon in the rest of the dissertation. One may be extremely grateful to the author, for instance, for providing a full and very competent translation of Yuán Rénlín’s treatise entitled “A general discussion of empty words” (pp. 23-5), which is very ably executed (with very few exceptions: p. 23 “must be recognized” → “must also be recognized”; “refer to functions” → “refer to usages/applications”). As LZ shows, the treatise was not only very original, but also quite provident in its admittance of the universality of HY, its stylistic markedness and pragmatic grounding.

What is more discomfoting in these chapters and *passim* throughout the dissertation is its sometimes overly polemic tone vis-à-vis formal approaches to syntax and morphology, as when LZ talks about avoiding to “enslave with [sic] a formalized machinery” (p. 12), about frameworks “dependent on exceedingly specialized theoretical prerequisites” (p. 50), when he dismisses systematic syntactic proposals as “peculiar tricks of transformational grammarians” (p. 59), or when he accuses “multifarious versions of formal linguistics” (p. 16) with “... ignoring necessary components of language and mechanisms involved in human communication only because they are difficult” (ibid.). On a more general plane, this leads to a very artificial and somewhat outdated construction of a dichotomy between formal and functional (or cognitive) linguistics as a kind of rhetorical prop: as if this dichotomy were homologous with a rift between treating syntax and semantics as independent modules or within one overarching framework (p. 13 seq.), as if there had been no generative semantics movement in the 60ies and 70ies, as if there was no Head-Driven-Phrase Structure Grammar or Lexical-Functional-grammar, no Jackendoffian “Conceptual Semantics”, trying to bridge precisely the gap at the the heart of LZ’s uneasiness *within* very formalized models! The same applies to needless confrontations of “Western misconceptions” and Chinese research (p. 48), which, as LZ himself shows, is by and large infested with the same kind of imprecisions and problems.

It is certainly overdone to say that modern Chinese only exhibits a “distant decendency to the C[lassical] C[hinese] situation” (p. 10), especially if the situation is compared at various later stages in the dissertation, although not as much as one might have hoped for. The same kind of slant appears, when LZ on the one hand rejects statistics as a valid means of dealing with historically limited and somewhat contingent corpora in some places (p. 15), and espouses its use elsewhere (p. 104). One might add that, even in the case of chronically unrepresentative corpora, simulation probabilistics (Mont Carlo simulations) can occasionally still



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come up with very promising results, as demonstrated for instance by Baxter in his *Handbook of OC phonology* (1992) on rhyming data.

While exclusion of the *Shijing* 詩經 (p. 17, p.38) as a text too archaic and stylistically marked might seem plausible at first sight, one might also reconsider this in view of recent late datings of the text (Serruys, Kern), which makes it less removed from the other prose classics included in LZ's study, but also in view of its proximity to the spoken language in some sections of the collection, hardly encountered elsewhere in pre-Qin literature. More problematic than this is to my mind the nonchalant exclusion of corpora featuring specialised terminologies (p. 46), for it is precisely in such texts as the legal, hemerological, numerological (*shùshù* 數書) and medical excavated manuscripts, that one might suspect systematic harnessing of *huóyòng* as devices to express recurring statements of a confined technical nature. On the other hand, this is somewhat compensated by the inclusion of the *lǐ* 禮-texts, in which similar technical language features conspicuously. Similarly problematic is the somewhat simplistic view of the "predominant prosaic style" (p. 17) of most of Warring States text, where they in fact are often prosimetrically constructed *Kunstprosa*, although LZ's sensitivity to stylistic issues are generally to be applauded.

Equally inadequate is LZ's characterization of glossing strategies employed in texts operationalizing paronomasia as a mode of lexical explanation, such as the *Shiming* 釋名 (p. 44): The "strained and fanciful explanations" in such works, apart from occasionally reflecting genuine phonological and morphological properties of Old Chinese, especially of complex initials, stem from a cultural background in which there was neither a concept of regular sound change, nor one of etymology in a modern, i.e. Neo-grammarians sense. Like the etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*, Han etymologies are embedded in a linguistic "essentialism", which not only accepts, but actively looks for divergent motivations of single lexemes as substantiation of a programme of motivational etymology. To classify such glossing strategies as "learned philological fabrications, false etymology" (p. 43) is very misleading, since it indeed entirely disregards the very "purpose of these books" (p. 44), namely to create a "natural", "magic" link between two words as much as between an extralinguistic referent and its linguistic representation. This topic was explored at length in Gérard Genette's *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* (1999) in the European context and by Johannes Bronkhorst in the Indian (*Numen* 48, 2001, 147-203).

The chapter on "Modern approaches" (chap. III) offers a very thorough critique of all major works which have dealt with HY in China and the West, which should be required reading for any student interested in the



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topic, and sensitively carves out the field for the subsequent dissertation. The constant amazement, even indignation of the author in his otherwise very perspicuous review of his scholarly predecessors in this section, with their lack of occupation with the *semantic* and *idiosyncratic* properties of *buóyòng* transitions in favor of purely morphosyntactic approaches and generalizations is truly amazing as well, given the general thrust of linguistic theorizing since the advent of structuralism *and* its generative detractors in linguistics. Pragmatic considerations of this type are simply not the core interest of theories which try not to describe what is (or has been) said, but what *can* or *could* be said (even in retrospect). “Interest”, then, is a slippery category, and very much in the eye of the beholder.

Minor issues in this section concern the analysis of *ér* as conjunction in the description of why it works as a test in Nikitina’s theory (p. 42). As has been proposed by several authors in the literature, *ér* but might in this usage be more felicitously construed as a marker of adverbialization (at least in some of the exx. quoted), and it would have been interesting to see how this would have influenced the theory of HY. With a similar question mark, the famous *gū bù gū* 觚不觚 passage, discussed on p. 60, does probably not refer to a chalice not having chalice *properties*, but to its not being used as such in a society which has undergone several ritual reforms, bemoaned by Confucius. Finally it is questionable, as hinted at in footnote 39 (p. 67), whether constructions of the type 斷 / 短髮文身 should not *always* be straightforwardly constructed as V-O sequences, thus avoiding the artificial setting up of a possessive subtype as in Nikitina’s framework, all the more since most characters in the V-slot of this construction have specialised verbal readings morphologically.

The shortest chapter of the dissertation on “Early morphology and HY” (chap IV, pp. 74-9) is, to some extent, its biggest disappointment for the present reviewer, because it nowhere addresses the complexity of the issue. Rather than providing a “relatively balanced picture of the matter” as it pretends to (p. 74), it summarily dismisses morphological approaches to the HY problematique as based on inadequate evidence, concocted by wickedly scheming or drunk medieval philologists, far removed from any spoken tradition. LZ is here all too easily slipping into a defatistic rehearsal of polemic arguments made by Branner and Harbsmeier elsewhere, and engages in a scholarly fairly unproductive polarization. Many arguments mentioned in passing in these few pages, are highly problematic and would merit a more sustained discussion, but let me just dwell on a few examples.

For instance, it is well known from Indo-European and Semitic linguistics that, contrary to what is insinuated on p. 74, the first attestation of a



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written record has no direct or necessary relationship whatsoever with the “archaicity” of the language represented. Thus, the tonal systems of modern Baltic languages reflect the Indo-European accent system better, than the classical languages written two millenia earlier (Kortlandt 19883, Lubotsky 1988), the case and tense systems of Tocharian might be closer to PIE than those of Sanskrit or Greek (Jasanoff 1976, Adams 1978, Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1984 etc.), or, to give an example “closer to home”, the verbal morphology of most Qiangic and rGyalrong languages, not written until the 20th century, is certainly closer to Prot-Tibeto-Burman than that of Classical Tibetan first attested in writing in the 7th c. A.D. (Jacques 1998, 2001). Even if the rhyme-dictionary tradition might not be indicative of a particular spoken standard, but represent some concoction of heterogenous post-Hàn traditions (p. 76), it might still imply a phonological diasystem, i.e. an implicit analysis of its authors, thus relatable in a more or less linear fashion to Classical Chinese ancestors.

Moreover, if all these thousands of discriminative readings known from the Early medieval tradition were but a an “artificial reading convention in premodern schools” (p. 77), would one not expect them, then, to be far more systematic, i.e. didactically applicable? Which other ancient literary tradition of exegesis allows itself such a mess of data in pedagogical contexts? And why would some of such artificially constructed readings have been taken over into the living dialects, where they survive as remnants, sometimes in everyday basic vocabulary, even in the otherwise morphologically impoverished Northern Mandarin varieties, and notwithstanding a sociolinguistic setting in which some 70% of the population was illiterate still in the 19th century (Rawski 1979)?

Finally, the argument that morphological distinctions, if genuine, would have to crop up in discussions of the indigenous scholarly traditions at some point, and, since there are no (I would say: few!) indications of that type in China, the language did *a fortiori* simply not have any morphology, is clearly mistaken. Neither in the Ancient Egyptian case, where we are dealing with a very morphology-rich Hamito-Semitic language, do we find more than a few scattered paradigms and supralinear diacritics in very late texts, nor do we observe the corresponding linguistic awareness in Mayan, which has a very productive derivational morphology, some inflexion and regular transitivity/voice distinctions marked on verbs (Suárez 1983, Houston, Robertson & Stuart 2000). And even in Sumerian, a fairly complex agglutinating language, we only come across some grammatical terminology in lexical lists, without any accompanying morphological or phonological analysis in Neo-Babylonian texts (cf. J. Black, *Sumerian Grammar in Babylonian Theory*, Rome 1984). In other words: if anything, the lack of morphological analysis in the pre-modern traditions



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seems to hinge more upon the constraints imposed by a morphosyllabographic *writing system*, than on the lack of the categories in the language. It also might be simply historically contingent, which traditions develop such a self-awareness like some Indo-European and Semitic languages, and which do not, because many morphologically rich languages (say, North-Caucasian, Amerindian, Tibeto-Burman languages) do not show a corresponding scholastic preoccupation.

Rather than to carefully address such issues, then, and to take the pains to show how precisely the currently available reconstruction schemes fail with respect to concrete HY examples, rather than trying to see whether there are parallels between the reconstructed segments or suprasegments and the semantic-cognitive categories carefully established in the remainder of the dissertation, LZ prefers to shove them away in a fairly cavalier fashion. If Sūn Yùwén is quoted (p.75, even if the name is missing in the bibliography), why not go through his handy catalogue of 10 arguments, why derivation by tone change is “real” (Sūn Yùwén 2000: 330-56, rev, ed., 2007: 406-36) and counter them, one by one? Why not take a comparative look at typologically similar languages, which have undergone massive loss of morphology, say, elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman, in Austronesian or Western African languages, approaching the isolating type, rather than just retreating to a supercilious, if comfortable, *non liquet* stance?! This jams a little bit with the admittance of derivational morphology as an unparadigmatic remnant phenomenon, operating on semantic, rather than syntactic structure elsewhere (p. 99), with the sensitive discussion of morphology as a layer diachronically preceding HY in n. 57 (p. 139), or, more generally, with the laudable openness, the “invitation to further research” (p. 235) championed in the dissertation .

The discussion of word classes (Chap. V) first situates the theoretical approach chosen within the framework of Croftian construction and Lakoffian cognitive grammar, i.e. in theories which conceive of word classes as universal prototypes with fuzzy boundaries, encroaching upon graded, overlapping zones established via semantically motivated extensions. Since these extension paths are motivated, but not fully predictable, and since the constructions in which word classes occur are established in a dialectical fashion, continuously juxtaposing syntax and semantics, the process of a language organized along these lines presupposes extensive pragmatic experience (cf. the quote from Harbsmeier on p. 84), rather than rule-based, threshold-style lexical decisions. The obvious problems such a theory poses for cognitive load management in acquisition and during online processing of stereotypical inferences, i.e. the classical “poverty of the stimulus” argument of the generativists, is left unaddressed in this section, as are alternative theories of wordhood



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and lexical compositionality (Hengeveld 2005, 2008; Baker 2003, Pustejovsky 1995).

The further exposition is clear and straightforward, and to be commended for its reticence in denying differentiation of Chinese conceptualizations of reality, where corresponding linguistic differentiations are superficially lacking (p. 98), a denial all-too readily encountered in sinological studies of Chinese language and philosophy. Equally convincing is the systematic account LZ provides for the non-occurrence of “double moves in the map” (p. 99-100), i.e. the restrictions on cyclical deadjectival/denominal derivations, although more graphic illustrations of the maps *he* had in mind throughout this chapter would have been quite helpful to trace the argument. Two types of polysemy — systematic and unsystematic, the latter closely akin to zero-derivation in English conversion — are differentiated, and N-V HY is situated in the unsystematic, albeit not arbitrary type, which typically displays more radical and less predictable semantic shifts. The rejection of the term “nominalization” for VPs with inserted *zhi* 之 I find less appealing, since it does not consider the possibility that *ye* 也 acts as a copula, precisely in the way predicted on p. 101 for [N1 N2 也] “adjectivization” constructions. Apart from good morphological and comparative reasons for treating *ye* as a copula, this is also corroborated by the frequent occurrence of clause-final, sentence internal 也 in such [S 之_{DEP} P 也] “complement clauses” (Gassmann 2002). Absent a full distributional analysis of words in the corpus of Classical Chinese, the chapter finishes off with a plea for “well grounded ... linguistic intuition” (p. 111), which is not the same as denying the principal possibility of such an analysis.

Chapter VI (Object words denoting processes) opens with an in-depth critique of the shortcomings in Zhāng Wénguó (2005), centering on Zhāng’s denial of the universality of HY and discussing meteorological expressions at length. LZ views the processes involved in HY as a principally unlimited reservoir of word-formation: even if many concrete derivations are contingently arrested in their spread throughout the lexicon and end up as occasionalisms, their well-formedness would have been apparent to the native speaker-listener. Well-formedness conditions, however, can only be stated in hindsight with respect to what was possible to be said, while the full identification of *impossible* sentences is barred by the infiniteness of lexical creativity and its subsequent lexicalization histories (p. 124). This is an important insight into ancient linguistic creativity and it prepares for a discussion of its dependence on contexts and conventionalizations in cases where possible feature interpretations compete, thus potentially undermining predictability of derived meanings or, indeed, resulting in multiple derivations of the same noun (p. 127). This leads to insightful discussions of metaphor (albeit not dif-



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ferentiated properly from metonymy) and pragmatic features, such as utterance spontaneity, surprise potential, or “phatic” hearer-orientation.

I will not try to summarize the immediately following chapter on “Semantic issues” (VI.2), which presents, *in nuce*, a catalogue of derivational N → V patterns according to semantic classes. This section is full of practical descriptive detail, as well as very insightful observations on such topics as the overlap of HY with causative-factitive and putative valency increases in transitive verbs (p. 155 seq.), the application of cognitive categorization theories to the relationship of HY types and their lexical subclasses (p. 157 seq.), or the lengthy discussion of the lexical fields of “calamities, diseases, sacrifices, taxes, and presents” (165 seq.), which points to the fascinating cultural insights which can be gained by a formal analysis of HY types, as well as proper personal and geographical names, the latter compared to similar formations types in Ancient Greek (p. 169). It is rounded off with a list of less easily boxed derivations and a discussion of their comparability with Clark and Clark’s (1979) taxonomy of denominal verbs, before moving to more theoretically inclined issues.

These circle around the notoriously evasive notion of wordhood in a language like Classical Chinese from the perspective of lexicology. While I find most arguments sketched here quite convincing, including its insistence on the absence of corresponding concepts of wordhood in ancient Chinese philosophy of language, the idea that *pòdú* 破讀 readings could have arisen secondarily to formally mark lexical independence of newly derived items, by analogically mimicking genuine early archaic remnants of derivational morphology synchronically still available (p. 178), strikes me as rather very far fetched. The fact that *pòdú* do not distinguish the categories outlined synchronically by the lexicologist of HY may have any number of reasons, including the wrong delineation of categories, and I do not see any good reason of *a priori* excluding derivation of distinct words, rather than distinct meanings under polysemy of the same root from its scope.

I have little arguments with the onomasiological approach to word formation presented on pp. 187 seq., and the ultimately Gricean theory of “cooperation” and “mutual knowledge” as underlying factors in the institutionalization of newly arisen HY meanings, all the more since it wisely refrains from adhering to Clark and Clark’s (1979) linear six stage model of idiomatization, in favour of a more realistic and dynamic view of the interplay between innovation, motivation and semantic opacity.

Commensurate to the quantitatively marginal occurrence of N → ADV derivations in texts, only mildly increasing towards the end of the War-



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ring States period, chapter VII is much shorter than the preceding discussion of denominal derivation. After a useful delineation of the parallels and asymmetries obtaining with adnominal modification, said to be due to the cognitively greater prominence of noun properties as compared to verb manners (p. 199), and after the description (again not visualized), of manner words on a Langacker type cognitive map (p. 201-202), the analysis distinguishes four types of surroundings in which nouns modify action words (lack of alternative constructions, conventionalization, added imagery, esp. by mentioning of the instrument, and purely stylistic considerations), a typological catalogue of semantic fields is opened, including modifications indicative of time, manners, instruments, referring analogically to the agent or patient of the verb, distributivity, and several minor categories, such as cause, degree or source. The types and functions are fairly straightforward, which is a consequence logically arising from the fact that manner words derive in predictable ways from property words, as shown by positional adjacency on the cognitive map. What is missing in this chapter, is a discussion of how derived adverbs differ from distributive pronouns, and how those negatives, which function syntactically as adverbs, can be incorporated into the semantic scheme.

The thesis closes with a short conclusion, modestly summarizing the major findings (chap. VIII). Naturally, one could always have hoped for more: a prospect into the situation in Modern Chinese, where good psycho- and neurolinguistic studies of word class discrimination start to appear; typological comparisons beyond Chinese which go further than the few remarks on Indo-European; a note or two on the stylistic and rhetorical functions of the derivational processes so painstakingly observed, on their treatment in didactic contexts; more commented full textual examples. Maybe the most striking absence, however, is the lack of any reflection on the role of writing in the alleged word-class “promiscuity” (a term, apparently inherited from Cikoski 1970), the closely related problem of homography, and the notorious underspecification of written representations in non-alphabetic writing systems. In a sense, the dissertation thus falls prey to the same lack of distinction between word and character, that was characteristic of the premodern Chinese scholarly tradition up to the 20th century (cf. n. 4, p. 21). It would have been interesting to see, how graphical derivations (however unsystematic) are paralleled by lexical derivations, and, possibly, *pòdú*-type reading distinctions, and, conversely, how the same situation is handled in non-alphabetic representations non-isolating languages.

Alle these quibbles, however, should in no way detract from the outstanding scholarship, which this thesis presents. It will surely have a lasting impact on the field of Chinese linguistics, and, it is to be hoped, even



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beyond. (Quite a few stylistic, orthographic and grammatical mistakes in the English should be corrected for such audiences, when published). This is an important and precise work, which deserves to be read and extended by the next generation of students of Classical Chinese worldwide. It is therefore without the slightest hesitation that I recommend it to the consideration of the committee as

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Lehrstuhl Sinologie
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eligible for the defence.

[Signature: Wolfgang Behr]