

Study of the “*Xian*(先)” of Oracle-bone Inscription “*Xian Gao Zu Liao Jiu*(先高祖祭酒)”

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Abstract

The “*xian*(先)” of oracle-bone inscription “*xian gao zu liao jiu*(先高祖祭酒)”, 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.先高祖祭酒。

B.惠河祭先酒。(《合集》32308)

Chinese Pinyin:A.Xian gaozu liao jiu.

B.Hui he liao xian jiu. (*Heji*32308)

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 “*酉*(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)、禘(fu)、岁(sui)、萑(guan)、餗(su)、彤(rong)、冫(bao)、毛(zhe)、俎(zu)、鬯(xie)、燎(liao)、品(pin)、饗(yu)、鬯(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?

丁巳卜：惠今月酒宜？（《合集》32216）

Chinese Pinyin: Ding si bu: hui jin yue 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》34501）

Chinese Pinyin: Hui ji mao jiu qiu?

Hui 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(𠄎)” and “xian she (先涉)” in inscriptions. For example:

(6)The oracle-bone inscription: 王惠𠄎𠄎𠄎？

弉襄𠄎先射，其若？

王惠𠄎𠄎先射，无灾？

弉𠄎𠄎先射，其若？（《合集》28407）

Chinese Pinyin: Wang hui𠄎si𠄎？

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, 王先馘卜丙岁迺申, 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, 殷贞, 令子商先涉羌于河?

庚子卜, 殷贞, 勿令子商先涉羌于河? (《合集》536)

Chinese Pinyin: Geng zi bu,que zhen,ling zi shang xian she qiang yu he?

Geng zi bu,que zhen,wu ling zi shang xian she qiang yu he? (*Heji* 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, 勿伐邛方, 帝不我其受佑? (《合集》6272)

Chinese Pinyin: Zhen,wu fa gong fang,di bu wo qi shou you? (*Heji* 6272)

Idiomatic translation To 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, 惠彘?
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 (河寮)” in sentence (1) B is the focus of inscription. Therefore, “hui(惠)” chose as the marker, “he liao (河寮)” 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 (先酒河寮)”. 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^改妣己示?
b.惠父己示先^改? (《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^改父己示)”. 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^改妣己示)”. According to that, the election inscription which is corresponding to inscription (1)B is “xian jiu gao zu liao(先酒高祖寮)”, while it is “xian gao zu liao jiu(先高祖寮酒)”. We believe that putting “gao zu liao(高祖寮)” 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(改)”? 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^改妣己示)” 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(先高祖寮酒)”? 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, 王一月敦侖, 受佑?
乙亥卜, 生月王敦, 受佑?
丙子卜, 王二月敦侖, 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(先高祖寮酒)” is actually “xian jiu gao zu liao(先酒高祖寮)”.

However, in order to make the focus stand out, it places “gao zu liao(高祖祭)” 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: 𠄎河𠄎[先][酒]?

先高祖祭酒? (《合集》32307)

Chinese Pinyin: 𠄎he 𠄎[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》

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