On the Generalization Mechanism of Chinese Kinship Term "jiejie"

Haiting Wang[1] & Jun Gao[1]

[1] College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Correspondence: Haiting Wang, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Abstract

There is a large kinship appellation system in Chinese, which reflects the social culture, traditional customs and national psychology of China. Based on the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change of historical pragmatics, this paper attempts to explore the generalization mechanism of Chinese kinship term "jiejie" (a Chinese appellation for elder sister). The study shows that the generalization of appellation "jiejie" is inseparable from pragmatic inferring and entrenchment of inferred meaning. If they realize that the original sense of "jiejie" does not work, the listeners may take into consideration the situational context and speaker' intentionality for secondary inferring. The generalization of appellation "jiejie" results from its semantic change, i.e., "jiejie" evolves into a social appellation to address non-relative members.

Keywords: generalization, Chinese kinship term "jiejie", Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change, pragmatic inferring, entrenchment of inferred meaning

1. Introduction

Chinese people value the unity of family and country, respect and order, and blood kinship. These value systems are reflected in the Chinese kinship appellation system, the research interest of scholars in linguistics, anthropology and sociology (Long & Yu, 2018). Kinship terms indicate the relationship between relatives in terms of marriage and blood relations. On the contrary, social appellation refers to the address convention in social life (Long, 2021). In modern Chinese, it is common to use kinship term to address non-relatives, which is called generalization of kinship appellation (Pan, 1998).

Historical pragmatics, as a branch of historical linguistics, studies the conventionalization of language use from the perspective of pragmatics. It adopts a usage-based approach to semantic change, focusing on how the change of social structure leads to the change of communicative needs, thus leading to the change of language structure (Zhang, 2017). One of its theories is the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change, claiming that the development of honorifics is the result of the conventionalization of conversational implicature. There is a fixed order from special conversational implicature to general conversational implicature (Levinson, 2001). The Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change aims to give a more detailed description of the pragmatic factors involved in semantic change and special conversational implicature was renamed as invited inference, general conversational implicature was renamed as general invited inference. Based upon this theory, Traugott (2006) describes the fixed order proposed by Levinson as "invited inference → general invited inference → semantic meaning (or prescriptive meaning)". The semantic change means that when a person learns a word, a new usage may be created in the process of using the pragmatic meaning of the word. Once the new usage is transmitted and copied by others, semantic change will occur (Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

In this paper, we are going to explore the generalization mechanism of Chinese kinship term "jiejie" based on Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change, and we will use some examples to illustrate the specific generalization process of the "jiejie" and try to reveal its generalization rule. The reason for choosing the term "jiejie" is that few scholars have studied this term and its generalization mechanism from the perspective of historical pragmatics.

2. Literature Review

Since the 20th century, especially in the last decade, scholars have paid more attention to the study of kinship terms in Chinese. For example, Li and Yang (2005) claim that the generalization of kinship terms is probably the most prominent emotional principle in Chinese appellations and displays different forms and characteristics. Guo

(2006) finds that "father" appellation is the first appellation and has been used till today, reflecting the influence of language and ethnic contact, population movement and the like Chinese history. Guo (2008) studies the historical evolution of the Chinese appellation of the spouse term, husband and wife. As for the generalization of Chinese kinship term "jiejie", some scholars have explored it based on historical pragmatics. Li and Cao (2012) systematically analyze "jiejie" in both ancient and modern Chinese dialects. It is believed that people use "jiejie" to express the sense of mother originated from ancient Northwest Chinese dialect.

However, till now few studies probe into the generalization mechanism of Chinese kinship terms especially the kinship term "jiejie". Therefore, this paper will explore the generalization mechanism of "jiejie" from the perspective of Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change and try to reveal its generalization rule.

3. The Origin of "jiejie" Appellation

3.1 "jiejie" Appellation as a Kinship Term

As a kinship term, the word "jiejie" not only refers to an elder female who has the same parents with someone else (or just the same father or mother), but also refers to mother. "jie" (姐) is a phonogram character. In its original *Xiaozhuan* (小篆) characters, "jie" (姐) is composed of "女" and "且". "女" character looks like a female, which indicates that the meaning of "jie" is related to a female. "且" refers to reproductive organs. At first, human beings formed a matrilineal society. At that time, people only knew that their mother was the head of the family and was not their father. And the fetus was conceived and born in the mother' s belly. "女" and "且" vividly expound the original meaning of "jie", that is, another name for mother. So, "jiejie" originally refers to the mother. *Shuowenjiezi* (说文解字) records that the ancient Shu (蜀) people referred to the mother "jiejie". Kinship term "jiejie" referring to mother have been retained until now, but now it mostly appears in modern Chinese dialects, such as Hui, Wu, etc. (Li & Cao, 2012).

"女" and "且" refer to a female of the same ancestor as a sister. "Ancestor" (祖) also means long and old, i.e., being born early and being old. It can be seen that "jiejie" is an elder female of the same parents, or just the same father or mother. "且" itself also has the meaning of also, or a higher level. The shape of "jie" (姐) indicates that she is a daughter of the parents, so the eldest daughter born first is "jie". Later, the word "jiejie" comes to mean an older female of the same generation who is related by blood (the same parents, or just the same father or mother). According to historical records, *Nenggaizhaimanlu* (能改斋漫录) written by Wu Zeng (吴曾) in the Southern Song Dynasty says, "Treat the women older than oneself (not including those called sister-in-law) as 'jiejie'" (Li & Cao, 2012). Since then, the word "jiejie" has taken on a second meaning.

It can be seen that "jiejie", as a Chinese kinship appellation, was originally used to address the mother and then extended to the second meaning, that is, to the elder female peers with the same parents (or just the same father or mother) and the second meaning is more common in modern Chinese.

3.2 "jiejie" Appellation as a Social Term

With the development of society and culture, the word "jiejie" tends to be generalized. It can be used to address non-relatives, and the context changes from family to social communication occasions. In the classic *Dream of the red Mansion* (红楼梦), "jiejie" is used to address the servant girl in the family, so it can be seen that the generalization of kinship term "jiejie" has appeared in ancient Chinese. Evolution is the basic feature of human language, and semantic change is divided into three modes: expansion, contraction and transfer. The semantic change of general words has the phenomenon of semantic generalization (Liu, 1997), the generalization of the appellation "jiejie" belongs to the mode of semantic expansion. "Jiejie" is associated with the female image of being older and kind to others, so it represents closeness and affection.

In daily communication, the word "jiejie" is very amiable and infectious, and easy to be accepted by both participants of communication. Respecting for seniority has been a fine tradition of the Chinese nation and referring to an older woman who has no blood relationship with oneself as "jiejie" reflects respect for each other, reduces the distance between communication participants, shows affinity and realizes emotional communication. The generalization of kinship appellation "jiejie" can be analyzed from the scope of appellation, semantic meaning and emotion.

First, as a kinship appellation, "jiejie" can only be used to address an older female of the same generation who is related to oneself by blood and to address one' s own mother in some dialects, which limits the appellation to one' s relatives. However, after the generalization of the word "jiejie", it can also be used to refer to older female, removing the prerequisite of blood relationship, so that the object of appellation "jiejie" is expanded. Second, semantic openness means that the referents assigned to the appellation "jiejie" by language users are not ready-made, but as many new referents as possible. In addition, from the historical evolution of "jiejie", it is not

difficult to find that its semantic change develops vaguely. Semantic openness, semantic fuzziness and word generalization complement each other (Long, 2021). Thirdly, although the person referred to by "jiejie" varies with the evolution of history, the word still retains a strong affinity. For example, "I turned to an older sister (jiejie) and asked: jiejie, what's going on? Why are these well-fed people always looking at the door? Why aren't they smiling?", the "old sister" (jiejie) mentioned here is not as a kinship term, but a social term. Such appellation will undoubtedly make each other feel warm and being respected. The generalization of kinship terms generally follows two principles: intimacy and respect (Pan, 1998).

4. The Generalization Mechanism of Appellation "jiejie"

Invited inference highlights the dual roles of both parties in verbal communication: the receiver deduces what the speaker wants to express through pragmatic reasoning (Long, 2021). Invited inference is strictly a conceptual metonymy within language (Traugott, 2006). Metonymy is a cognitive process in which a conceptual entity provides psychological access to another conceptual entity, the metonymy target, within the same idealized cognitive model (Long, 2021). The semantic change induced by metonymy is based on the similarity between the new meaning and the old meaning of words. There exists a stage where the new meaning and the old meaning coexist. The conceptual metonymy process in language is actually the pragmatic reasoning (Traugott, 2006).

Semantic change involves the generation and loss of meaning, and the generation of new meaning is the core of semantic change (Wu, 2014). The generalization of "jiejie" involves the generation of new meanings. The speaker uses the appellation strategically to address the hearer, which contains some pragmatic meaning and invites the hearer to deduce its meaning. As a result, invited inference becomes a general invited inference, and the semantic meaning of the word may be generalized after several times of inferences, which further develops into a new meaning of the word (Qiao & Chen, 2015). According to Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change, the entrenchment of pragmatic inference and inferred meaning is an important mechanism related to semantic change (Kong & Qin, 2017).

4.1 Pragmatic Inference

The principle of conversation and cooperative proposed by Grice (1975) influences on pragmatic inferencing. Horn (1984) proposes two principles of pragmatic inferencing: the Q principle and the R principle. The former refers to the quantity maxim, while the latter refers to the quality maxim. Q principle focuses on saying enough, and R principle focuses on not saying too much. However, semantic generalization involves the increase of information, which is mostly based on the R principle.

The appellation "jiejie" is based on R principle and its pragmatic inferencing is caused by metonymy, cause-result metonymy in particular. Li (2008) proposes that cause-result metonymy is a metonymy between different parts of a whole and it often refers to the person or thing that caused the result. Pragmatic inference involves two meanings: literal meaning and pragmatic meaning. Literal meaning is the surface meaning of a word, while pragmatic meaning refers to what the speaker wants to express in a specific context. There is an example from *Dream of the red Mansion* (红楼梦) to show the pragmatic inferencing process of the generalization of "jiejie".

Keqing said to the servants of Bayou "jiejiemen, please bring Baoyu to follow me here." (可卿对宝玉的丫鬟们 道, "姐姐们, 请宝叔随我这里来".)

Keqing addresses servants of *Baoyu* as "jiejie", but here it's obviously not its literal meaning, because the servants are not related to *Keqing* by blood, and listeners are invited to infer. The servants give up the expectation of literal meaning and guess its pragmatic meaning. They find the most relevant pragmatic meaning, that is, *Keqing* call them "jiejie" and expresses respect for them. Once the pragmatic meaning is entrenched, the generalization of kinship term "jiejie" will come into existence.

It can be seen from this example that pragmatic reasoning is based on language use and is restricted by context and intentionality (Long, 2021). Relevance theory holds that human cognition seeks the greatest relevance in cognitive context, while human communication seeks the best relevance in context of situation, language and culture (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The use of language begins with intentionality, which refers to what the speaker wants to express. As far as the generalization of the appellation "jiejie" is concerned, the speaker chooses to use the appellation "jiejie" to address the hearer implies a certain pragmatic meaning (i.e., showing respect and closeness to the addressee), which is also the intention of the speaker. After hearing the speaker's "jiejie", the hearer deducts its meaning according to the context and the speaker's intentionality. Once this meaning is entrenched (entrenchment of inferred meaning), the meaning of the appellation "jiejie" will be

generalized.

4.2 Entrenchment of Inferred Meaning

In the process of semantic generalization, entrenchment of inferred meaning is a key step. In pragmatics, the meaning of words is linked with the user and context, and pragmatic meaning is more important than literal meaning. Once inferred meaning is entrenched, then semantic generalization will occur. Entrenchment is the process of forming a fixed view of something. The generalization process of the appellation "jiejie" is also the process of the inferred meaning of the word "jiejie" being entrenched, that is, after the listener hears the speaker call her "jiejie", the actual meaning derived is normalized.

Long (2021) proposes that there is a fixed path for entrenchment of inferred meaning: literal meaning → pragmatic meaning → semantic meaning. To analyze this path concretely, under the influence of the specific context and the speaker's intentionality, the words uttered by the speaker do not necessarily mean what he or she actually says, but contains a pragmatic meaning, which the speaker invites the listener to deduce. After hearing the speaker's words, the listener understands through judgment that he or she needs to give up the literal meaning and determine the pragmatic meaning of the utterance. After the entrenchment of pragmatic meaning, it becomes the semantic meaning of the utterance. In the process of entrenchment of inferred meaning, re-understanding is a necessary step. Once the literal meaning of an utterance doesn't make sense in a specific context, it shows the inferred meaning is entrenched.

Therefore, semantic generalization of words involves pragmatic inferring and entrenchment of inferred meaning, and the main steps are as follows: (1) the speaker produces an utterance and invites the listener to infer; (2) the listener first makes inferences according to the literal meaning, and if feasible, he gets the information of the utterance; (3) if it is not feasible, the listener will interpret the utterance with the help of the context and the speaker's intentionality; (4) to determine the pragmatic meaning of the utterance, the semantic meaning of the utterance can be obtained after the pragmatic meaning is entrenched. In this way, the semantic generalization of words is generated. However, it is important to know that pragmatic inferring may always exist, but inferred meaning cannot always be entrenched, and Traugott (2018) also believes that it is impossible that inferred meaning always could be conventionalized.

In short, the generalization of the appellation "jiejie" is the main process of semantic change of the word "jiejie". Language is in constant change and appellation terms are no exception. The speaker knows that the listener is not an older female of the same generation who is related to him or her by blood, but still chooses to use the term "jiejie". In this context, the speaker expresses respect and closeness, and contains the practical meaning of the expression he or she wants to express, namely the pragmatic meaning. To start a conversation, the speaker may strategically use appellation terms and invite each other to infer. When the other participant finds the literal meaning will not work, he or she will refer to the context to determine the pragmatic meanings. The generalization of the appellation "jiejie" is also produced in this way. Pan (1998) suggests that both generalized kinship terms and their variants have strong affinity meanings and respect in practical communication. Speakers strategically use the kinship term "jiejie", so as to narrow the distance between the two parties and achieve good and effective emotional communication.

5. Conclusion

In daily communication, appellation terms are a very common form of language, which can reflect the blood relationship or social relationship and status of both parties in communication. The appellation "jiejie" belongs to the kinship appellation used to address non-relatives with strong feelings of closeness and respect. Based on the Invited Inferencing Theory of semantic change of historical pragmatics, this paper discusses the generalization mechanism and generalization rule of the Chinese kinship term "jiejie", and argues that the generalization of the appellation "jiejie" is inseparable from pragmatic inferring and the entrenchment of inferred meaning, revealing that the generalization rule of appellation "jiejie". For further study, the focus can be put on a comparative study between Chinese appellation "jiejie" and "elder sister" in English and in-depth study of "xiaojiejie" (小姐姐, a Chinese appellation for pretty girl) on the Internet and so on.

References

Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. New York: Academic Press.

Guo, X. (2006). A multi-angle study of the father's appellation series in Chinese. *Studies of the Chinese Language*, *2*, 166−174, 192.

Guo, Y. L. (2008). *Study on the diachronic evolution and related factors of marital appellation*. Wuhan: Central China Normal University.

Horn, L. (1984). Towards a new taxonomy for pragmatic inference: Q-based and R-based implicature. In D. Schiffrin (Ed.), *Meaning, Form and Use in Context: Linguistic Application* (pp. 11−42). Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press.

Kong, L., & Qin, H. W. (2017). The Constraining mechanism of word meaning evolution: Context and Semantic schema. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, *40*(02), 60−66.

Levinson, S. C. (2001). *Pragmatics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Li, F. Y. (2008). *An introduction to cognitive linguistics*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

Li, S. X., & Yang, T. (2005). A Cultural psychological study on the Generalization of Chinese kinship appellations. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, *26*(03), 89−92.

Li, X. P., & Cao, R. F. (2012). Diachronic evolution of Chinese kinship term "jie". *Chinese Linguistics*, *2*, 35−40, 95−96.

Liu, D. W. (1997). The metaphorical semantic generalization of popular words. *Chinese Language Learning*, *4*, 33−37.

Long, D. Y. (2021). Study on the generalization mechanism of "laoshi" appellation. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, *29*(03), 19−23. https://10.16362/j.cnki.cn61-1457/h.2021.03.004

Long, Z. W., & Yu, Z. (2018). A review of Chinese kinship appellation in recent ten years. *Journal of Jishou University* (Social Sciences Edition), *39*(S2), 210−213.

Pan, Y. (1998). On the generalization of kinship terms. *Applied Linguistics*, *2*, 34−38.

Qiao, Y., & Chen, W. J. (2015). A probe into "capricious" popular construction. *Contemporary Rhetoric*, *5*, 54−58. https://doi.org/10.16027/j.cnki.cn31-2043/h.2015.05.006

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Traugott, E. C. (2006a). Historical Pragmatics. In L. R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 538−561). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756959.ch24

Traugott, E. C. (2006b). Semantic change: Bleaching, strengthening, narrowing, extension. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (pp. 124−131). Oxford: Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/01105-6

Traugott, E. C. (2018). Rethinking the role of invited inferencing in change from the perspective of interactional texts. *Open Linguistics*, *1*, 19−34. https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2018-0002

Traugott, E. C., & Dasher, R. B. (2002). *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486500

Wu, F. X. (2014). Language Contact and Semantic Replication - On semantic evolution induced by contact. *Journal of Soochow University* (Philosophy & Social Science Edition), *35*(01), 113−119. https://doi.org/10.19563/j.cnki.sdzs.2014.01.013

Zhang, X. S. (2017). Present situation and prospect of historical pragmatics. *Journal of Yunnan Normal University* (Teaching & Studying Chinese as a Foreign Language Edition), *15*(06), 61−72. https://doi.org/10.16802/j.cnki.ynsddw.2017.06.006