

Original Paper

A Study of the Types of Morphemization in Contemporary Chinese

Bo Feng¹

¹ College of Foreign Studies, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China

Received: February 16, 2024

Accepted: April 02, 2024

Online Published: April 18, 2024

doi:10.22158/eltls.v6n2p163

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n2p163>

Abstract

All living languages change and linguistic change occurs at all levels of linguistic systems. Morphemes, as elements used for coining new words, are often subject to language change. This paper attempts to study morphemization in Chinese, which is a type of morphological change in languages. It is found that syllables in phonetic borrowings and those in lianmian-words in Chinese are the two sources of morphemization in contemporary Chinese. What's more, Morphemization of syllables in phonetic borrowings mainly happen in the phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit and English.

Keywords

Morpheme, morphemization, phonetic borrowings, lianmian-words

1. Introduction

Every living language is in a continuous state of variation across time, and language change occurs at all levels of linguistic systems, including sounds, word structure, sentence structure, etc. As the smallest units of a language, morphemes are not stable. Thus, the morphological systems of a language are dynamic. In contemporary Chinese, there exists a type of morphological change called “morphemization”, which has become more and more prevalent. It is a linguistic phenomenon that syllables which were not meaningful originally and were not word-building elements now contain semantic information and are capable of combining with other morphemes to form new words. In the evolution of Chinese morphemes, there exist a vast quantity of linguistic units which have shifted the status from meaningless syllables into morphemes. This paper aims to make a detailed study of all the types of morphemization in contemporary Chinese and describe how this linguistic phenomenon happened in Chinese.

2. Morphemization of Syllables in Phonetic Borrowings

In Chinese, syllables in phonetic borrowings are the most common entities to undergo morphemization. No language ever finds itself spoken in a completely isolated environment, with no contact at all between its speakers and the speakers of other languages. The ceaseless contact between speakers of different languages has often had a great impact on the historical development of those languages, such as the birth of pidgins, creoles, bilingualism, diglossia, etc. Among them, the most obvious is the borrowing of words.

While borrowing words from other languages, the receiving language usually adopts different strategies, such as transliteration, loan translation, loan blend, etc. By transliteration, a foreign word is transcribed phonetically almost one-to-one by the characters of the receiving language. Words borrowed through this strategy are named phonetic borrowings, for the pronunciations of the words are transmitted from the lending languages to the borrowing languages.

Chinese has borrowed numerous words from other languages through transliteration. As characters in phonetic borrowings mainly simulate the pronunciations of the words in the original language, they are mostly not indicative of any meaning, though they probably have original meanings as native Chinese characters. Therefore, they are regarded as meaningless syllables rather than morphemes.

Language is always in the process of development. Some of the meaningless syllables in phonetic borrowings may change their status into meaningful units, and thus functioning as morphemes to derive series of words. This type of language change is considered to be morphemization of syllables. In the following parts, we shall look at this type of morphemization in phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit and English.

2.1 *Phonetic Borrowings from Sanskrit*

It has been a long time since morphemization of meaningless syllables in Chinese phonetic borrowings took place for the first time. Sun Jishan (1995, p. 32) claims that it first happened to phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit. Monosyllabic morphemes that evolved from multi-syllabic borrowings appeared quite early in Buddhist terms (Su, 2003, p. 6).

During the course of the development of the Chinese language, there have been three periods when massive numbers of foreign words entered Chinese. The first time Chinese borrowed foreign words on a large scale was after Zhang Qian's journeys when a large number of words from countries of Central and West Asia were adopted. Then at the end of Western Han Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced into China from India, which brought about the borrowing of numerous words of Sanskrit origin. The third time Chinese absorbed a large quantity of words from other languages was at the end of Ming Dynasty and the beginning of Qing Dynasty when words from western languages poured into Chinese vocabulary due to the increasing social contacts between China and western countries. Of the three most significant periods in the enrichment of Chinese vocabulary, the second one during which Sanskrit words swarmed into the Chinese language in great numbers is considered to be the most influential one, for words borrowed during this period exceeded the other two periods greatly and they have influenced

the development of Chinese vocabulary greatly in various ways (Liang, 1994).

As Buddhism was a totally foreign culture to Chinese people when it was introduced into China, transliteration was employed as the main strategy to translate Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, a great many phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit came into being in the Chinese language, which were multi-syllabic at the early stage of usage, such as 塔婆, 佛陀, 僧伽, 魔罗, 比丘尼, etc. Later, people extracted one character from each word to stand for the meaning of the whole and combined it with other morphemes to form several new words. As a result, these characters, which were formerly just syllables without any lexical information, have acquired meanings and become morphemes.

The following table offers us some of the morphemes extracted from the phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit and the new words formed by them.

Table 1. Examples of Morphemization in Phonetic Borrowings from Sanskrit

phonetic borrowings	extracted morphemes	new formations
佛陀	佛	佛教 佛经 佛法 佛门 佛殿 佛堂 佛像 佛家 拜佛 借花献佛
塔婆	塔	宝塔 铁塔 石塔 塔基 塔门 木塔
魔罗	魔	魔鬼 魔怪 魔王 魔爪 魔障 妖魔 恶魔 邪魔 着魔
僧伽	僧	僧人 僧徒 僧侣 僧尼 斋僧 老僧 高僧
禅那	禅	禅宗 禅心 禅寺 禅房 禅杖 禅语 坐禅
比丘尼	尼	尼姑 尼庵 僧尼
释迦牟尼	释	释家 释教 释典 释藏

Liang (1994, p. 181) reports that there are twenty-one monosyllabic Buddhist terms in Chinese which are detached from multi-syllabic phonetic borrowings of Sanskrit origin and are productive word-building elements. A lot of words, most of which are bisyllabic, are formed by the combination of these monosyllabic morphemes and Chinese morphemes, as illustrated with the examples in the above table.

2.2 Phonetic Borrowings from English

Apart from Sanskrit, English is another major contributor to Chinese vocabulary. The borrowings from English have exerted a great influence on Chinese vocabulary and morphology. “The most obvious morphological change is that more bisyllabic and polysyllabic words have appeared in Chinese, as a result of transliterating English words” (Hu, 2003, p. 224). For example, 幽默, 逻辑, 坦克, 沙发, 的确良 for *humour*, *logic*, *tank*, *sofa*, *Dacron*. Since the syllables in phonetic borrowings are used for their phonetic contents alone, they are meaningless and can’t be regarded as morphemes. Instead, the whole word, which contains more than one syllable, appears to be one morpheme.

Every living language has a kind of assimilating power. When or after a foreign word is borrowed into one language, it has to conform partially or totally to the phonetic, graphical or morphological standard of the borrowing language (Hu, p. 108). Influenced by the characteristics of the Chinese language that most Chinese single characters are morphemes and bisyllabic words constitute a large proportion of the basic word stock, many meaningless syllables in phonetic borrowings have been taken as meaningful units and used as word-building blocks to derive numbers of new words, especially bisyllabic words. According to the collected data morphemization of meaningless syllables in phonetic borrowings from English is confined to nouns. In what follows, we shall find two subcategories of nouns, namely common nouns and proper nouns.

1) Common nouns

In the past years, English has exerted a significant influence on Chinese morphology owing to the contact of the two languages. Guo Hongjie (2002; 2005) claims that the phenomenon of morphemization is one impact of English loan words on Chinese morphology. As the phonetic borrowings are being used more and more frequently, some syllables that represent only phonetic contents of loan words in the original language have been detached from the loan words and represent the semantic contents of their parent words. As new morphemes, they have been particularly rich sources of new words in the historical evolution of Chinese.

Table 2 lists the new morphemes derived from some common nouns of phonetic borrowings from English and the new words formed by them.

Table 2. Examples of Morphemization in Borrowed Common Nouns from English

common nouns	extracted morphemes	new formations
的士	的	打的 的哥 的姐 拦的 的票 面的 残的 摩的 马的 驴的
巴士	巴	大巴 中巴 小巴 豪华巴 冷气巴
啤酒	啤	扎啤 鲜啤 散啤 听啤 青啤 冰啤 黑啤
模特	模	名模 男模 女模
酒吧	吧	吧娘 吧女 吧台 茶吧 书吧 网吧 陶吧 剪吧 冰吧
迪斯科	迪	迪厅 蹦迪 迪吧 迪友 迪姐 老年迪
咖啡	咖	热咖 苦咖 奶咖 冷咖 黑咖 品咖
卡片	卡	龙卡 绿卡 磁卡 打卡 信用卡 饭卡 储值卡 电话卡
奥林匹克	奥	申奥 奥赛 奥班 奥星 奥运村 奥委会

It's significant to note two points suggested by the examples in the above table. Firstly, the new

morphemes are predominantly formed by taking the first syllable of each word, with the only exception of 吧, which is detached from 酒吧. Wang (1992, p. 46) provides us with a reasonable explanation of it. He says that the shortening of 的士, 巴士, 模特, 迪斯科, 啤酒 into 的, 巴, 模, 迪, 啤 conforms to Chinese morphology and the principle of abbreviation in that the distinctive meaning of a compounded word is usually conveyed by the first morpheme of it and the main principle of abbreviation is to retain the semantic information of the original word in the shortened form. As most phonetic borrowings are bisyllabic, they are likely to be treated as compounds, though they are of foreign origins and represent only the sounds of the words in the original language. The only exception is 吧 from the word 酒吧, which is an example of a special type of phonetic loans, namely phonetic calques, which take the meaning as well as the sound of the source word into account. The reason for the morphemization of 吧 rather than 酒 is that 吧 is the character which corresponds to the sound of the borrowed word *bar* in English.

The second point to note is that some of those new morphemes, while conveying the exact meanings of the original words, have extended their meanings. Two typical examples are 的 from 的士 and 吧 from 酒吧. In words like 打的, 的哥, 的姐, 的票, 的 means 的士 exactly. However, in words like 面的, 摩的, 马的, 驴的, etc., 的 refers to any vehicles for rent. Similar to 的, the morpheme 吧, besides signifying 酒吧, can now refer to any small public house offering certain services, as shown by the words 书吧, 网吧, 茶吧, etc.

Apart from the extension of meaning, 的 and 吧 have even been used as free morphemes, as illustrated with the following expressions:

- 1) 几个人一部的。
- 2) “赶快打的去。”有人喊。可美术馆距火车站太近，有“的”不愿意去啊。
- 3) 泡各种各样的吧。

A statement can be made from the above expressions that 的 and 吧 have fully evolved into morphemes, being either bound or free. Zhou Hongbo (1995, p. 64) contends that the degree of morphemization of syllables representing phonetic contents of borrowed words varies. According to him, the criteria used to measure the degree of morphemization include: 1) explicitness: the capability of conveying a context-free meaning; 2) productivity: the capability of combining with other morphemes.

Su (2003, p. 6) claims that it's quite difficult to distinguish the two statuses of “having already undergone morphemization” and “being undergoing morphemization”, for they are dynamic and there is a continuum upon which the two statuses rest. What's significant is to realize the existence of this phenomenon and to break the shackles of the traditional idea that the morphological systems of Chinese are stable and monosyllabic morphemes all derive from our native language. In the present study, we consider syllables in phonetic borrowings to have become morphemes so long as they convey explicit meanings and are capable of forming more than one new word.

2) Proper nouns

Proper nouns in phonetic borrowings are another class of words where we can seek out several examples of morphemization of meaningless syllables. Generally, Chinese borrows proper nouns from other languages by transliteration. To fit in with Chinese, many syllables in them are quite potential to be abstracted from the whole words to represent the meanings of them. Those proper nouns include names of places, countries, people and measures.

Table 3 presents some examples of morphemization in borrowed nouns signifying names of places, countries and people.

Table 3. Examples of Morphemization in Borrowed Proper Nouns

proper nouns	extracted morphemes	new formations
英格兰	英	英国 英军 英尺 英里 英联邦 英文
美利坚	美	美国 美元 美钞 美军 美金 美式
德意志	德	德国 东德 西德 德军 德寇 德文 德语
亚细亚	亚	亚洲 东亚 西亚 中亚 亚运会
苏维埃	苏	苏联 苏军 苏共 苏制
马克思	马	马列主义 马哲
莎士比亚	莎	莎翁 莎剧

Apart from borrowed nouns denoting names of places, countries and people, those signifying units as a standard of measurements, which are not only of English origin, are another special class of proper nouns to which morphemization happens. The following table offers some of them and the morphemes that evolved from them.

Table 4. Examples of Morphemization of Proper Nouns Signifying Units

proper nouns	origins	extracted morphemes
摩尔	English <i>mole</i>	摩
瓦特	English <i>watt</i>	瓦
米突	French <i>mètre</i>	米
安培	French <i>Ampère</i>	安
伏特	Italian <i>Volta</i>	伏
欧姆	German <i>Ohm</i>	欧

Traditionally, the morphemes listed above are considered to be the abbreviated forms. In the present study, they are also regarded as cases of morphemization on account of the following three points: 1) when appearing in the borrowed words, the single characters are meaningless syllables that just simulate the sounds of the borrowed words in the original languages; 2) the single characters express

explicit meanings when they are used in different contexts; 3) the single characters are capable of attaching to members of a certain category, namely numerals like 一, 二, 三, 千, 万, and so on. The fundamental difference between them and the cases listed in the first three tables is that they have a relatively limited productivity in word formation.

As we have seen, the proper nouns involved in morphemization are mainly from English, with only a small proportion from other languages, which are a few units of length, electrical power, force, resistance, etc. As discussed earlier, English has exerted a significant influence on Chinese morphology. Thus, a conclusion can be made here that apart from phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit, those from English is another major locus of the occurrence of morphemization of syllables.

3. Morphemization of Syllables in Lianmian-Words

In addition to phonetic loan words, some lianmian-words in Chinese are also the locus of the occurrence of morphemization. Lianmian-words are disyllabic single-morpheme words that consists of two syllables. Generally speaking, a lianmian-word is an inseparable entity and a monomorphemic word. Thus, the constituent parts of it are meaningless syllables rather than morphemes. However, in language use, there exists the practice of separating the component parts of a lianmian-word and combining the segments with other morphemes to form series of words. See the examples in the following table.

Table 5. Examples of Morphemization of Syllables in Lianmian-words

lianmian-words	extracted morphemes	new formations
蝴蝶	蝶	粉蝶 彩蝶 花蝶 蝶泳
骆驼	驼	驼峰 驼背 驼铃 驼绒 驼队
蜘蛛	蛛	喜蛛 毒蛛 幼蛛 蛛网 蛛丝
玻璃	玻	钢玻 彩玻 硬玻 毛玻 玻壳
蚂蚁	蚁	雌蚁 雄蚁 工蚁 兵蚁
蜥蜴	蜥	巨蜥 草蜥 蛇蜥 鳄蜥 飞蜥
蟾蜍	蟾	蟾宫 蟾酥

The most widely accepted way of identifying morphemes is substitution, to substitute an element in a word with a morpheme to determine whether it is a morpheme or not. Take 粉蝶 for instance, 粉 is able to be substituted with other morphemes, such as 花 and 彩. And 蝶 keeps a fixed meaning while combining with 粉, 彩 and 花. At the same time, in the words 粉蝶, 彩蝶 and 花蝶, 蝶 can also be substituted with other morphemes with no doubt. The two-way substitution manifests that 蝶 is a morpheme in the words 粉蝶, 彩蝶 and 花蝶. It must be made clear that by claiming that 蝶 is a morpheme in words like 花蝶, 粉蝶, 彩蝶, it doesn't mean that the case is the same in the word 蝴蝶,

which is doubtlessly a monomorphemic word. Once 蝶 is used in the lianmian-word, it's not a morpheme any more.

With regard to the relationship between 蝶 and 蝴蝶, Yang Xipeng (2004, p. 45) and Cao Wei (2004, p. 23) state that they are just shortened forms and original forms. In order to cater to the features of Chinese word formation, people tend to use one syllable to express the meaning of a multi-syllabic monomorphemic word and combine this syllable with another morpheme to create new words. Therefore, the shortened forms are carrying the meanings of the original forms and become meaningful linguistic units.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the author has made exhaustive classifications of the types of morphemization in contemporary Chinese, illustrated with a large number of examples. Morphemization in Chinese is classified into two categories in this paper: morphemization of syllables in phonetic borrowings and morphemization of syllables in lianmian-words. According to the different origins of phonetic borrowings, the first category is further classified into two subcategories, namely morphemization in phonetic borrowings from Sanskrit and those from English, including borrowed common nouns and proper nouns from English. As a type of morphological change that has become more and more prevalent in Chinese, morphemization deserves a good deal of attention of language researchers, especially those who study morphology and lexicology. As it continues to occur in Chinese, deep studies of it will not only contribute to better understanding of how languages change and correct predictions of the development of morphemes, but also help language users to increase their vocabulary and even to make up new words in certain circumstances to enhance the expressive power of language.

References

- Cao W. (2004). *Research on Modern Chinese Vocabulary*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Guo H. J. (2002). English Loanwords in Contemporary Chinese and Their Impact on Chinese: the Period from 1980s to the Present. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, (5), 1-4.
- Hu. Z. Y. (2003). *Language Contact and Lexical Borrowing of English and Chinese; A Comprehensive Study*. Jinan: Shandong University Press.
- Liang X. H. (1994). *The Structure of Buddhist Words and the Development of Chinese Words*. Beijing: Beijing Language Institute Press.
- Su X. C. (2003). On Formation and Extraction of Monophonic Morphemes of Foreign Origins in Contemporary Chinese. *Studies of the Chinese Language*, (6), 1-11.
- Sun J. S. (1995) Formation and Characteristics of Morphemization of Meaningless Syllables. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, (5), 32-34.
- Yang X. P. (2004). *On Chinese Morphemes*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- Zhou H. B. (1995). Morphemization of Transliterated Syllables in Loanwords. *Applied Linguistics*, (4),

63-65.