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A Brief Analysis of the Dual Readings of Split-Syllable Verbs in the Linxian Dialect of Shanxi

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Abstract

A distinctive phenomenon in the Linxian dialect (Shanxi) involves certain monosyllabic verbs exhibiting dual readings: a split-syllable form and a monosyllabic form, each associated with distinct meanings. Focusing on verbs such as 滾 (gǔn, roll) and 擺 (bǎi, sway), this study employs traditional philology and textual exegesis to trace the historical emergence of these divergent meanings. The analysis reveals that meanings linked to the split-syllable forms—often characterized by iterativity, descriptiveness, or aspectual nuances—consistently emerged later in historical records than the basic meanings associated with the monosyllabic forms. Consequently, this paper argues that the split-syllable phenomenon in the Linxian dialect is not a retention of complex consonant clusters from Old Chinese. Instead, it likely arose from semantic differentiation driven by prosodic constraints and expressive modality. This case study offers a new perspective for re-examining the origins of split-syllable words and the debate surrounding Old Chinese phonology.

Keywords

Linxian Dialect, Split-Syllable Words, Semantic Change, Old Chinese Complex Consonants, Philological Investigation

1. Introduction

To date, there is no unified explanation for the origin of split-syllable words. One prevailing view holds that split-syllable forms found in Chinese dialects constitute evidence for the existence of complex consonant clusters in Old Chinese. The question of whether Old Chinese possessed such consonant clusters has long been debated, with the main evidence focusing on the phenomenon of *liangxie* (characters sharing phonetic series with divergent readings) and the existence of split-syllable words in dialects. However, the *liangxie* phenomenon, which has served as a primary piece of evidence, has been challenged and questioned by many scholars (Zhou, 1998; Cai, 2005; Sun, 2018; Zheng, 2021).

By contrast, research on split-syllable words has largely remained at the level of description and analysis, without offering a deeper investigation into this fundamental issue.

Linxian County is located in the western part of the Lüliang region of Shanxi Province. The Linxian dialect belongs to the Fenzhou sub-group of the Lüliang branch of Jin Chinese. The author has observed that in this dialect, split-syllable verbs exhibit a phenomenon of dual readings, which are often associated with different meanings. That is, the same character may occur in both split-syllable and non-split-syllable forms within the dialect, with each form expressing a distinct meaning. This phenomenon cannot be explained as a case of literary–colloquial alternation. On the one hand, both usages are very common in the dialect, and the meanings they convey are often more archaic and diverge considerably from those in Standard Mandarin. On the other hand, the meanings expressed by the split-syllable readings that differ from Mandarin appear to have emerged at a later historical stage.

This phenomenon provides a new perspective for further exploration of the origins of split-syllable forms and the question of whether complex consonant clusters existed in Old Chinese. At present, regarding the *liangxie* phenomenon, two main hypotheses coexist in Chinese linguistics: one posits that Old Chinese had complex consonant clusters, while the other proposes that Old Chinese contained disyllabic characters (Cai, 2005). Under either hypothesis, split-syllable phenomena should emerge simultaneously with corresponding semantic distinctions, implying a close relationship between phonology and semantics. Following this logic, if split-syllable phenomena in dialects are indeed valid evidence for this debate, then the meanings associated with split-syllable forms should predate those associated with monosyllabic forms.

Although it is theoretically possible that a dialect preserves an Old Chinese phonological form while the meaning has changed in a way consistent with developments attested in the literature—while the meaning corresponding to the monosyllabic reading remains unchanged—such a scenario is unlikely to constitute a systematic pattern of change. A more plausible explanation is that split-syllable phenomena emerged and were retained during periods of semantic change. This constitutes the basic hypothesis of the present study.

Accordingly, this paper adopts methods from traditional philology and textual exegesis to investigate, from the perspective of documentary evidence, the earliest emergence of the meanings associated with such characters in the dialect. It aims to determine whether split-syllable or monosyllabic forms are chronologically prior, and on this basis to offer further reflections on the issue of whether Old Chinese possessed complex consonant clusters.

In cases where the original character cannot be definitively identified, the symbol □ is used in place of the character, with the pronunciation and meaning indicated in brackets 【 】, following Sun Yuwei (2022).

2. Exegesis of Split-Syllable Vocabulary

2.1 滾

/kuəʔluəng214/ (split-syllable form), a verb meaning "to move by turning or rolling over," for example:

(1) □ [nəi214, third-person singular] just likes to come to this house to play, rolling that ball back and forth.

(2) Roll far away from me!

It is worth noting that the split-syllable form *滾* is mostly used for vivid descriptions of an action. When the discourse focus is on the entity being described and the action is merely narrated as part of the event, another form, □ **[pho51]**, is used instead, for example:

(3) That wheel □ [pho51, meaning "to roll," usable both as an intransitive verb and in a causative construction] along with a rumbling sound; it's so much fun.

/kuəng214/ (non–split-syllable form), an adjective meaning "(liquid) boiling," for example:

(4) Your medicine is boiling; quickly □ [tsəuʔ, corresponding to Mandarin *端* 'to hold and carry'] it down.

Leipian (《类篇》) glosses: "*guben qie*. Describes the appearance of great flowing water," referring specifically to liquids boiling. This is also the earliest attested meaning of *滾*. At the same time, in ancient medical contexts, *滾* was also used to mean "to stir," as in the following passage:

According to *Guiyi Fang* (《鬼遗方》) in ten juan, still extant in the Northern Song but now only a few prescriptions survive: when bamboo or wooden splinters are embedded in the flesh and cannot be removed, apply head grime and they will come out; when a newborn cannot urinate, take four *he* of human milk and one *cun* of scallion white, decoct until boiling (*jian gun*), divide into four doses, and urination will follow; when a newborn vomits milk, take two *he* of human milk, a small amount of bamboo shaving, and two grains of salt, decoct together until boiling, add cow bezoar grains and administer; to treat scabies, grind pine resin finely, add an appropriate small amount of light calomel, and stir (*gun*) until evenly mixed.

—Yan Kejun of the Six Dynasties, *Quan Liu Song Wen*

During the Tang dynasty, the usage of *滾* gradually expanded from denoting specifically the surging of water to describing violent wind, falling flowers, the sound of a river, black vapors, and the like. Semantically, these referents inherently involve "flowing" or "movement," yet their motion lacks a definite direction and should thus be understood as "churning" or "turbulent movement," for example:

The rushing current twists and turns, linking to the Milky Way;

Falling flowers roll endlessly, floating amid rosy clouds.

The fine scenes of the four seasons are inexhaustible,

As if directly connected to the Peach Blossom Spring.

—He Jing, "Inscribed on Longxi in Jizhou," *Quan Tang Shi*

Gorge colors press up toward the sky,

The river's sound rolls across the ground.

Zhuge Liang had profound intent;

Zhong Hui, what talent had he?

Trust that this is not of human making;

I pour my sorrow into a cup of song.

—Liu Cha, "Entering Shu," *Quan Tang Shi*

By the Five Dynasties period, a usage meaning "to move while tumbling or rolling" appears, for example:

The tiger [omen] at Lingchang Ford: a jade disc was sunk to announce sincerity; the jade rolled onto the islet, the water waves surged upward at the ford, and palaces and halls all collapsed, crushing to death more than a hundred people.

—Cui Hong of the Five Dynasties, *Sixteen Kingdoms Spring and Autumn Annals* (variant edition)

Observing the historical record, it becomes clear that in the history of Chinese, the usage meaning "to move while rolling over" emerged later than the usage meaning "liquid boiling."

2.2 摆

/pələi214/ (split-syllable form), meaning "to sway up and down rhythmically," for example:

(5) That □ [qie214, a classifier used before occupations or "children/people," also to refer to unknown, disliked, or dissatisfying objects] is over there shaking its head and wagging its ears—I've no idea what it's doing.

(6) When the wind blows hard, it sways really fast.

It can be seen that 摆 here describes a repetitive, back-and-forth motion.

/pəi214/

2.2.1 Verb

(a) "to wash," specifically referring either to rinsing away suds after washing clothes or hair, or to a light, brief, non-repetitive washing action.

(7) Rinse those clothes for me, will you?

(b) to place; to arrange; to display.

(c) to show; to flaunt.

2.2.2 Noun

The hem of a skirt, commonly used in reduplicated form.

(8) Be careful—if that skirt hem is too long, you might trip over it.

As early as the Western Han dynasty, examples of the meaning "to shake or vibrate" can already be found in the literature, for instance:

When the people's clothes become soiled, they wash them with ash lye, yet they never become clean. Only by burning the clothes in fire for two meals' time, then shaking and waving them (*zhen bai*), does the dirt fall off by itself, leaving them white as snow.

The usage of *摆衣服* ("to rinse clothes") in the Linxian dialect is consistent with this pattern.

In the *Yupian* (《玉篇》), *摆* has two meanings: one equivalent to *捭*, and the other glossed as "*bǐ pí qiè*. In the Guandong region it refers to a skirt." The *Hongwu Zhengyun* (《洪武正韵》) defines *摆* as follows: "*摆* means *bǎihé* (to open and close), to open, to move aside, to push away, to line up and shake; to strike with both hands; also written as *捭*." From these definitions, it can be seen that earlier *摆* was typically a transitive verb, with the patient of the action constituting the focus of the sentence. The semantic emphasis lay on the object to which the action of *摆* was applied and the resulting effect.

During the Six Dynasties period, usages of *摆* in the literature conform to this pattern, for example:

Cai Bojie watched someone brandishing a flute handle; Sun Xinggong listened to singing girls; they shook and waved (*zhen qie bai* [*zhen*: to shake]) until it broke. When Wang Youjun heard of it, he was greatly angered and said: "This was a musical instrument used for longevity rites by the Three Ancestors—how dare Sun's son strike it to pieces!"

—Liu Yiqing, *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Six Dynasties)

The main biography merely states that when Quan Yan met with his subordinates and asked for their strategies, Yu waved aside (*bai*, 'to push away and shake,' extended to 'to discard') the opinions of the crowd and alone proposed a strategy of resistance; it does not say that Su had previously devised a plan—this was probably meant to appropriate Su's merit.

—Chen Shou, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (Six Dynasties)

By the Tang dynasty, examples appear that are syntactically ambiguous, for instance:

With gold-plated eyes and silver-covered teeth,

It leaps swiftly, its shaggy coat swaying both ears.

—Bai Juyi, "Xiliang Dance (Satirizing the Frontier Officials)," *Quan Tang Shi*

It is not difficult to see that the phrase *我摆* ("I sway / I wave") is ambiguous. If *摆* is analyzed as a transitive verb, *我摆* means "I *摆* something," which corresponds to the Linxian usage *摆衣服* ("to rinse clothes"). From this interpretation, sentences such as "我把衣服摆了" ("I rinsed the clothes") or "衣服被我摆好了" ("The clothes were rinsed by me") can be derived. If *摆* is taken as an intransitive verb, however, it means that "I" am in a state of swaying, with the agent and patient both being "I." This is exactly the case in the example above, where the agent is the lion dance and the patient is part of the lion dance itself—namely, its "two ears." This usage is identical to the Linxian expression "摇头摆耳" ("to shake the head and wag the ears").

With further development, purely intransitive uses emerge, such as:

For the moment there are no worldly affairs at all;

I only worry about willow catkins and poplar blossoms,

Which naturally sway and drift, hard to keep.

—*Complete Song Lyrics*

In the Linxian dialect, the split-syllable form 摆 is commonly used to describe the spontaneous swaying of objects and functions as an intransitive verb. Apart from cases like "摇头摆耳," where the agent and patient are the same entity, it cannot be used as a transitive verb.

2.3 扒

/pəʔlaʔ/ (split-syllable form), meaning "to gather together or scatter things by hand or with a rake," for example:

(9) Eat the rice in a couple of mouthfuls—don't leave any.

(10) Rake that pile of ashes together properly; we'll clean it up later and □ [hɔng214, equivalent to Mandarin 拿 'to take'] take it back.

/paʔ/ meaning "to peel off; to take off," for example:

(11) Just take off those clothes properly—if you keep wearing them like that for a long time, won't it be uncomfortable?

(12) Peel those peanuts and eat them; there's no need to save them.

The *Yupian* states: "扒: *bǐ shā qiè*. To split." The *Leipian* adds: "To pull out; also *bù bá qiè*, to break; also *bǐ bié qiè*, to split apart." Initially, the core meaning of 扒 was "to divide" or "to separate." By the Southern Song dynasty, 扒 could be found compounded with 排 to express the meaning "to arrange or deploy," for example:

Later generations, when using troops, merely engage in chaotic slaughter—where is any sense of discipline? Ji Tong said that the Eight Formations could be used, but they probably could not in practice. When actually facing the enemy, one simply sees how things are arranged and deployed (*pai ba*) at the moment. When Wu Lin defeated the invaders at Shajinping, the front ranks were locked in fierce combat, while the troops in the rear all surged forward together and slaughtered the enemy indiscriminately—what formation method was that?

—Zhu Xi, *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* (Southern Song)

In the Yuan dynasty, usages meaning "to gather things together" first appear in the literature, for example:

I now put this silver in the stove hollow. I rake away the ashes; this stove has not been used for years. I bury the silver and rake some ashes back over it—who would know there is silver hidden in the stove?

—Liu Junxi, *Zaju: Pang Jushi Mistakenly Repays a Debt from a Past Life* (Yuan dynasty)

This shows that the meaning corresponding to the non–split-syllable form emerged later than that of the split-syllable form.

2.4 撇

/bəliʔ/ (split-syllable form), meaning "to throw away," for example:

(13) Throw it away early on.

/phiʔ/ meaning "to skim lightly from the surface of a liquid," for example:

(14) Skim all that □ [ləi214, meaning "some"] bloody water clean off.

Originally, the meaning "to skim lightly from the surface of a liquid" was more common, as illustrated

by:

You may wonder why I drink every morning;

If I did not tell you, you would never know.

Fortunately, there is no pain anywhere on my body—

It is just the right time to skim and taste from the jar.

—*Quan Tang Shi*

In the Northern Song dynasty, examples meaning “to throw away” begin to appear, for example:

Apart from the elderly, women, and children who were killed or injured, very few survivors remained. As the city walls were nearby, it was difficult to advance. They therefore selected strong men together with regular bandit soldiers, filled cloth bags with earth, and ran forward; then they threw down (*pie*) the leather bags and hurried back.

— Chen Gui, *Manual on Defending Cities* (Northern Song)

2.5 绊

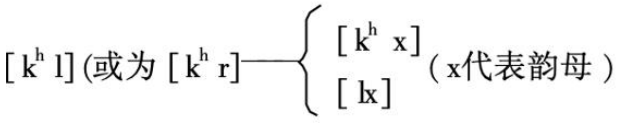
/paʔ/; **/pəʔlɛ53/** — both mean “to trip briefly while walking.”

Although this character corresponds to only one meaning, its usage still shows a certain connection with phonology. In the dialect, when describing the action or scene of being tripped, the split-syllable form is used. At the same time, however, there are four-character expressions in the Linxian dialect in which *绊* appears in a non–split-syllable form, such as “绊□□□【tɕʰiʔ·hʯʔke214, meaning ‘easy to fall’ in the Linxian dialect】.” In such cases, the semantic focus lies on the *result* of being tripped rather than on the action itself.

3. Discussion of the Split-Syllable Phenomenon

3.1 Phonology

With regard to the debate on complex consonant clusters, Cai Yonggui (2015) proposes that characters exhibiting “one phonetic value with two *xie* series” (一声而两谐) were originally characterized by complex consonantal onsets. If such onsets later split into two series of simple consonantal onsets, then at the earliest stage of this split the two resulting syllables should have shared a common rime. The model may be schematized as follows:



However, voiceless consonants themselves do not carry sound and must rely on an accompanying vowel to be perceptible, whereas voiced consonants inherently carry voicing and therefore do not necessarily require a shared rime. For this reason, the above inference is not well founded. At the same time, this line of reasoning does highlight a crucial point—namely, that syllables possess the potential for internal differentiation.

Some scholars have interpreted split-syllable phenomena in dialects as instances of so-called “*l*-infix

words” (嵌 *l* 词), a view that is not without merit. Wang (1994) points out that *l*-infix words are characterized by contrasts in stress (strong vs. weak) and in sonority (dark vs. bright) within the whole word, which may be broadly subsumed under the category of trochaic rhythm. The “rime” accompanying the initial consonant of split-syllable words is relatively uniform, typically consisting of the most easily articulated vowel among all rimes. This makes it more plausible that, after the insertion of *l*, the initial consonant naturally acquired a transitional vowel, rather than that such forms evolved from originally disyllabic characters.

3.2 Semantics

Xing (2020) observes that certain split-syllable words “exhibit clear semantic relationships and can be grouped into several semantic clusters based on shared semantic features. What is particularly noteworthy is that words that are semantically related also tend to be phonetically similar.” On this basis, Xing classifies split-syllable words into five semantic groups, such as the “*bula*” group, the “*deli*” group, the “*guliu*” group, the “*kulong*” group, and the “*gela*” group.

The present study shows that, in cases where a single character in a dialect corresponds to both split-syllable and non-split-syllable forms, the meanings associated with the split-syllable forms tend to exhibit a “repetitive” or iterative quality. These meanings provide a descriptive summary of an action and are often followed by an eventive verb, such as *扒地吃了* (“ate it by scooping/gathering”) or *撇地扔了* (“threw it away”), or by complements that further delimit the verb, such as *摆得呜呜的* (“swaying with a whooshing sound”) or *滚过来滚过去* (“rolling back and forth”). By contrast, the meanings associated with monosyllabic forms are more event-oriented, with the semantic focus placed on the result of the action rather than on the manner in which the action unfolds.

3.3 Grammar

From a synchronic perspective and in comparison with Standard Mandarin, Fan (2012) points out that G-S verbs exhibit mimetic or iconic semantics: they vividly depict concrete and dynamic actional states, enhancing imagery and displaying a feature of “semantic specificity”, with nouns, verbs, and adjectives all tending toward referential specialization.

From a diachronic perspective, this paper traces and compares a special subclass of split-syllable verbs that display dual readings. We find that the meanings corresponding to non-split-syllable forms are more basic and fixed, and do not undergo semantic evolution. By contrast, meanings derived from these basic senses during semantic development—characterized by iterativity, sceneness, and modal or aspectual nuances—are expressed through split-syllable forms. This constitutes an important instance of non-linear change in grammatical evolution.

In summary, the relationship between split-syllable phenomena and semantics should not be analyzed solely on the basis of the concrete content of semantic description. From a prosodic perspective, it can be observed that syllables corresponding to action-oriented meanings are longer than those corresponding to event-oriented meanings. Similar to reduplication, this phenomenon represents a type of non-linear change motivated by modality or expressive stance.

4. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be concluded that the meanings associated with split-syllable forms emerged later than those associated with monosyllabic forms. Accordingly, this paper argues that the emergence of split-syllable phenomena is closely related to prosody and modality, and is very likely a by-product of semantic differentiation. It therefore bears no direct relationship to the hypothesis that Old Chinese possessed complex consonant clusters.

With respect to the issue of complex consonants in Old Chinese, this study can only offer a line of inferential reasoning rather than conclusive evidence. Moreover, the phenomena identified here occur in only a limited number of characters. Further research should compare these cases with split-syllable words that do not exhibit dual readings, in order to identify similarities and differences and to arrive at conclusions of broader significance.

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