

LIN200 Mini Research Paper (Draft)
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In pursuit of a universal definition of word, one would easily find out that some analytic languages do not follow the pattern determined by mainstream synthetic languages, for instance, English, French, Spanish and so on; Chinese is such a language. In fact, Chinese has its own ‘word’ structure, which is called **zì**, so that it still meets the criteria for grammatical word in English. It is different, while it serves well as the a part of the foundation in this language. In other words, the definition of word in a synthetic language cannot be applied in an analytic language.

In the following paragraphs, firstly I will briefly introduce the difference between two distinct types of morphologies, namely synthetic and analytic language. In the next section, I will explain how the synthetic version of word fails in Chinese with two simple examples, in order to support the argument made by Hockett (1944:255) that there are no words in Chinese. Then I will demonstrate the validity of Chinese **zì** using the same examples. Finally I will try to conclude with a summary that the definition in different morphologies are incompatible out of its unique type.

According to Dixon (2002:9), “ the majority opinion has been that ‘word’ is primarily a unit of grammar although, as Matthews (1991:209) notes ‘the word tends to be a unit of phonology as well as grammar.’” In most of cases, English words are distinguished by their various sets of morphemes, which are the minimal unit of meaning. And through this constructing method, most of words are made up of more than one morpheme. We call this sort of language synthetic

language. On the contrary, if most of the morphemes can stand out alone as one word, we call this language analytic language.

In such an analytic language as Chinese, the old traditions ‘words’ that worked out with western language is totally useless (Hockett 1944). And this can be exemplified in many detailed aspects, for example:

(a) 人声(a man’s voice) and 动人声音(a touching voice) share the same segments 人 and 声.

Although they stick close together in both, they are still ‘not necessarily bound forms’ since they have different meanings (Hockett 1944).

(b) 卖萌(be adorable) and 卖个萌(be adorable once) have 卖 and 萌 in common, while in the former one they are neighbouring and separated in the latter. However, the inserted 个 does not affect the meaning of the word, the general meanings of two are equivalent. That is to say, the flanked segments are ‘not necessarily free forms’ (Hockett 1944).

(c) And similar examples are numerous.

Hockett (1944:255) also mentions that it is almost granted that every language does have a conception of ‘words’. By the counterexample indicated above, intuitively we can infer that, if the synthetic definition of word is not applicable, then there must exist a different set of word structure rather than morphemes.

Chao (1945:8) calls this structure ‘tzu’ (same as zì in pinyin) or ‘the general Chinese word’. It actually represents the character in Chinese writing. Unlike western language writing, such as English, Chinese writing is composed by millions of characters, and these characters are made up

of various strokes with certain order and placement. To verify the validity of zì, I would like to stick with the previous two examples:

(a) In 人声, 人 stands for ‘a man’, 声 means ‘the voice’, so 人声 means ‘a man’s voice’. Only by picking out each character can 动人声音 makes sense. 动 means ‘moving, shocking, touching’ and 音 has the same meaning as 声 here. Then we can understand that 动人声音 means ‘a voice that moves people’ rather than ‘move the person’s voice’ if we treat 人声 as a whole word.

(b) For 卖萌 and 卖个萌, it’s quite trivial that 个 here just means ‘one, once’.

In conclusion, there are more evidence to prove that the seemingly ‘word’ in Chinese does not represent the full property as an English grammatical word. However, the characters building up the ‘word’ play the role instead de facto. The morphological structure in synthetic languages cannot be continued in an analytical language, and vice versa. To be specific, zì can fail in English as well, since what words are made up, namely letters, do not have meanings in most of occasions, except the meaning of certain letter themselves and abbreviations. Comparatively speaking, neither of the morphologies is compatible in a different linguistic background. Further research and experiments are needed in order to study the reasons why different morphologies emerge.

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