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# THE CONCEPT OF “FREE” AND “BOUND” IN SPOKEN CHINESE

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In the *Concise Dictionary of Spoken Chinese* 國語字典<sup>1</sup> by Professor Y. R. CHAO and myself, we have marked each word (i. e., *tzŭ* 字 or character) free (F) or bound (B) according to whether it can be used singly or occurs only in close conjunction with another. In the Introduction (p. xxiii), Professor CHAO points out that (1) B means always bound, but F means sometimes free; (2) many words are free for some of their meanings but bound for others.

This feature of the *Concise Dictionary* has met with the approval of its reviewers,<sup>2</sup> two of whom have even expressed the desirability of further elaboration. Dr. John DE FRANCIS has suggested a subdivision of the bound *tzŭ*, and Professor W. Simon has listed some offhand questions for subsequent research based on the division of characters into bound and free. In this article, I wish to discuss some of these suggestions and also the problem of bound and free expressions (characters and compounds) in general.

The suggestion made by Dr. DE FRANCIS is that “the category of Bound syllables (not ‘words’) should be divided into two groups: meaningless bound syllables (like *shan* and *hu* in *shanhu* [‘coral’]) and meaningful bound syllables (like *fu* and *mu* in *fumu*, ‘parents’). The former are fully bound (occurring only in one word), and the latter are semi-bound (occurring in more than one word).” The reader will note that Dr. DE FRANCIS does not

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, 1947. Hereafter referred to in this article as the *Concise Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> (1) Lŭ Hsiang 呂湘 in *Chung-kuo wên-hua yen-chiu hui-k’an* 中國文化研究彙刊, or *Bulletin of Chinese Studies* 7 (1947) 251-258.

(2) Lo Ch’ang-p’ei in *HJAS* 10 (1947) 432-435.

(3) John DE FRANCIS, in *FEQ* 7 (1948) 447-448.

(4) W. SIMON, in *Asia Major* (New Series) 1 (1949) 137.

(5) E. GASPARDONE, in *JA* 237 (1949) 159-160.

agree to the use of "word" for *tzŭ* and has replaced it with "syllable." He prefers to reserve "word" for a free expression only, which may be either a *tzŭ* or a compound. But this is merely a matter of usage. As long as the terms are defined, no careful reader will find them confusing.<sup>3</sup>

The suggestion of Dr. DE FRANCIS appears interesting but unfortunately it involves difficulties. In the first place, the word "meaning" itself is not free from ambiguity, in spite of efforts made by linguists, philosophers, and others to clarify its meaning or meanings. In order to make a test, the linguist has to define what he calls meaningful and meaningless and to ascertain that it is clear to all his informants. In the second place, he has to take into consideration the difference in the background (especially education) of his informants. One syllable which is meaningful to one may be meaningless to another. Convergence of various responses on the part of informants is not always easy to obtain. In the third place, the identification of meaningful and meaningless syllables with those occurring in more than one word and those occurring in only one is doubtful. Let us take for example the syllables *shan* and *hu* in *shan-hu*, which Dr. DE FRANCIS classifies as meaningless. For those who do not know Chinese characters this is probably true. But there is still the possibility for some of them to feel that *shan* may be identical with *shan* 山 "mountain" or *hu* with *hu* 湖 "lakes." For those who know enough characters the syllables can be identified as 珊 and 瑚, and for them they are not entirely meaningless. In such compound names as *shan-hu* "coral," each character usually will remind people of the whole compound. This however does not mean that the same character may not appear in other compounds. In the particular case of *shan-hu*, both characters are used in other compounds, e. g., *shan-shan* 珊珊 "tinkling sound (of ornaments),"

<sup>3</sup> Dr. DE FRANCIS' objection to the statement that with very few exceptions the "words" of the language are monosyllabic is groundless, because he forgets what he has just mentioned above in his review, i. e., the *Concise Dictionary* equates "characters" with "words." His comparison of the entries designated as literary in the dictionary to *yclept* in English is misleading, because the latter is an archaic word, whereas the former are still used in modern Spoken Chinese.

and *hu-lien* 瑚璉 “two types of ritual vessels.” In addition *shan* and *hu* also occur in personal names.

To come back to the problem of free and bound characters (perhaps we can call them *tu-yung tzŭ* 獨用字 and *ho-yung tzŭ* 合用字 in Chinese), it may be explained that they are distinguished in the *Concise Dictionary* by applying the test question: Is a character (or syllable) able to stand alone as a complete and independent utterance (i. e., followed by a full pause)? If the answer is positive, it is free; otherwise, bound. Of course, sometimes one has to imagine particular cases in order to make the decision. For example, *chien* first tone 監 is marked F for the meaning “to supervise” because it can be used as an answer to questions like *Chien kung pu chien* 監工不監 “Are you going to supervise the work?” or *Chien k’ao pu chien* 監考不監 “Are you going to supervise the examination?” This, however, does not include questions like “What *tzŭ* did you say?” because the answer can be any *tzŭ* in quotation marks, and any thing so quoted, even a mere sound like “a” can be made free by hypostasis.

As co-author and informant of the *Concise Dictionary*, here I must confess that, although I used this test quite conscientiously, I allowed myself to be influenced in a few cases by another test, namely, whether the character by itself may be used as the subject or the main verb. It was on these grounds that *chê* 這 “this,” *na* 那 “that,” and *mei* 沒 “not to have; there is not” are marked as F, although they are not used alone as complete and independent utterances.

In the *Concise Dictionary* a careful distinction is made between *chê* 這 “this thing; this situation, this state of affairs” and *chei* or *chê* 這 “this, these” and a similar distinction is made between the two corresponding entries *na* 那 and *nei* or *nê* 那. Examples are given to show that the *chê* meaning “this thing, etc.” and the *na* meaning “that thing, etc.” may be used as subjects in sentences. *Chê* and *na* are considered free and *chei* and *nei* bound. But if the decision is to be made entirely depending upon whether the *tzŭ* may be spoken alone as a complete and independent utterance, even the first *chê* and *na* should also be marked bound, although they are designated as free on pages 217 and 221.

The use of *mei* 沒 as a free word has gained favor with some youngsters in recent years. For example, I have heard it used as an answer to questions like *Ni ch'ü lê ma* 你去了嗎 "Did you go?" and *T'a yu shu ma* 他有書嗎 "Has he a book?" But this usage still causes the raising of brows. The standard expression to be used here is *mei-yu* 沒有. Similarly questions like *Ni yu shu mei-yu* cannot be shortened to *Ni yu shu mei*. Sentences like *T'a mei shu* "He has no books," *Ta mei ch'ü* "He did not go," and *T'a mei lê* "He has no more," *Wo hai mei nê* 我還沒呢 "I haven't done it yet," are, of course, good usage. Still *mei* should be marked bound in accordance with the rigid test.

In this connection, I wish to quote Professor SIMON's remark that "a dictionary which notes the alternatives 'free' or 'bound' in the case of each single character, is a mine of information which may lend itself to very important subsequent research. Questions like the following come to the mind at once. 'How many of the characters included in the dictionary occur only "free" or only "bound," how many occur with the suffix -tz or -l, what is the distribution if we proceed to grouping words according to their meanings (e. g., parts of the body)? Are practically all verbs "free" and all nouns "bound," etc., etc.?' " These are good questions. The last one is particularly suggestive, because it leads to the question whether there are free and bound parts of speech.

The problem of parts of speech in Spoken Chinese is complicated, but modern grammarians can easily agree upon a number of rather clear-cut classes. Based upon this assumption, I shall discuss some interesting groups of expressions in relation to their being bound or free, making no claim that I am establishing a complete set of parts of speech.

The numerals from one to ten are all marked bound in the *Concise Dictionary*. The reason is that when the number refers to anything specified, it will occur at least with an auxiliary noun.<sup>4</sup> To answer the question *Ni yu chi-pên shu* 你有幾本書 "How many books have you?" the free-word answer "three" in English will be expressed in Chinese by *san-pên* 三本 but not by *san* alone. However, in mathematics, one may use any number as a free

<sup>4</sup> Auxiliary nouns are discussed in the *Concise Dictionary*, pp. xxvii-xxix.

expression, and in a dice game, one may shout at a rolling die for any number from one to six, with the hope that the die will be obedient. For these meanings, the numerals may be marked free.

Numbers larger than ten are also bound when they refer to specific things. There are however three groups of exceptions. The first group includes round numbers like *êrh-shih* 二十 “twenty,” *san-ch'ien* 三千 “three thousand,” etc., because *shih*, *pai*, *ch'ien*, *wan*, *i* 十百千萬億 are used as auxiliary nouns. The second group includes numbers from eleven up, when used to refer to age. The years ten and under are *shih-sui* 十歲, etc. The third group includes numbers from eleven to thirty, which are used as free expressions for days of the month, the eleventh to the thirtieth. This usage started when only the lunar calendar was in use, where the first ten days are *ch'u-i* 初一 to *ch'u-shih* 初十. The days in a solar month are *i-hao* 一號 to *san-shih-i-hao* 三十一號. Some people have adopted the use of numbers from *shih-i* on for days in a solar month, to *san-shih-i*.

Auxiliary nouns are bound as we have explained on page xxvii in the *Concise Dictionary*. A compound formed by an auxiliary noun and a preceding number however is free. Of course there are many characters which may be used as either a noun or auxiliary noun. For example, *t'ou* 頭 as the head of some person or some animal is a free expression, but as an auxiliary noun (as in *i-t'ou niu* 一頭牛 “a head of cattle”) it is bound.

It is interesting to note that a noun with a preceding auxiliary noun alone (i. e., without a number or demonstrative before the auxiliary noun) may be used as a complete object in a sentence. This may occur in two different constructions. When it is used as the object of an ordinary verb, as in *Kei t'a hsieh fêng hsín pa* 給他寫封信吧 “Shall we write him a letter (or something)?” the noun is indefinite, i. e., it can be any letter. When it is used as the object of the pre-transitive *pa* 把, as in *T'a pa fêng hsín tiu lé* 他把封信丟了 “He lost his letter,” the noun is semi-definite, i. e., although the speaker cannot say it is *the* letter, he does know that it is a letter of some importance. Expressions like *fêng hsín* are not free, although *hsín* itself is.

Whether a one-character (i. e., one-syllable) noun is free or bound is entirely a matter of usage.<sup>5</sup> Thus the marks F and B in the *Concise Dictionary* may be found useful. Nouns made of two or more characters are usually free, because they may be used alone as answers to questions like "What is this?" "Who is he?" etc.

Personal pronouns like *wo*, *nǐ*, *tā* are, of course, free. The demonstratives *chē* and *nà* are bound as discussed above. Question words like *shuí* 誰, *shén-mé* 甚麼 are free, but the compound *to-mo* 多麼 "how? to what a degree?" (as in *to-mo k'uai* 多麼快 "How fast?") is always bound.

Most one-character verbs are free.<sup>6</sup> The exceptions are generally semi-literary in nature. Verbs composed of two or more characters are usually free, because they may be used alone as answers to V-not-V (verb + *pu* + same verb) questions, taking the place of "yes" in English.

Adjectives in Chinese function very much like verbs, and for this reason are termed "stative verbs" by Professor George A. KENNEDY. The above discussion of verbs also applies to them.

Adverbs do not constitute a clear-cut part of speech in Chinese. To clarify the problem a bit, I propose that expressions which may correspond to descriptive adverbs in English be regarded as adjectives. For constructions like *T'a hsieh-tê hao* 他寫的好 "He writes well" a literal rendering may be something like "He, the way he writes, is good." Therefore, *hao* is to be considered an

<sup>5</sup> The usage may vary with different dialects. For example, the free expressions *hsieh* 鞋 "shoes" and *wa-tzū* 襪子 "socks, stockings" in *Kuo-yü* become 鞋子 and 襪 in Wu dialects.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Professor CHAO's important discussion on verbs and surnames with reference to different degrees between free and bound words in the *Concise Dictionary*, p. xxvii, note 1. It may be noted here that the results will be different if one adopts a less rigid definition for a free word. For instance, the test could be whether a character or a compound may be used by itself to perform a certain grammatical function (for example, to be a subject) or to be recognized as belonging to certain part of speech (for example, a conjunction). If conjunctions are considered a free part of speech, the character *yin* 因 "because, because of" will be a bound character in *pai-hua* 白話 (the conjunction is *yin-wei* 因為), a semi-bound character in *pai-hua-wên* 白話文 (some writers use it as a shortened form of *yin-wei*), but a perfectly free character in *wên-yen* 文言.



adjective. Imperative constructions like *K'uai-k'uai-êrh-tê tsou* 快快兒的走 and *Tsou-tê-k'uai-k'uai-êrh-tê* 走得快快兒的 may be “Be quick and walk” and “Walk so that the result will be quick,” thus both may be translated by “Walk quickly!” In these constructions, one can apply comparison and make sentences like *T'a hsieh-tê hao i-tien-êrh* 他寫的好一點兒 “He writes better,” and *K'uai-tien-êrh tsou* 快點兒走 or *Tsou k'uai-tien-êrh* 走快點兒 “Walk more quickly.” Potential constructions like *T'a hsieh-tê-hao, Wo hsieh-pu-hao* 他寫得好,我寫不好 may be interpreted as “He writes and can get good results. I write and cannot get good results,” therefore, “He can write well, but I cannot.”

After the elimination of this group, adverbs like *hên* 很 “very,” *yeh* 也 “also,” *ch'ang* 常 “often,” and *pu-ta* 不大 “not often, not very” are generally bound. To answer the question “Isn't it pretty?” one may simply say “Very” in English, but in Chinese one has to say *Hên hao-k'an* 很好看, not *hên* alone. The expression *pu* 不 is, indeed, free, but whether it is an adverb or a verb or something else is debatable. It is worth noting that *pu* may be used directly preceding the particle *lê* to make the free expression *pu-lê* meaning something like “Not this time” (as may be said to decline an invitation) or “I am not going to do it any more” (as may be said by a child when spanked for his mischievousness), or directly preceding the particle *nê* as in *Hai pu nê* 還不啞 “Not (going to do it) yet.” Uses of the character *mei* 沒 have been discussed above.

Regarding adverbs, one may add that they should not be considered identical in function with time and place words. For example, a time word like *chin-t'ien* 今天 may be used as an adverbial modifier as in *Wo yao chin-t'ien ch'ü* “I want to go today,” and to answer the question “When are you going?” the answer in Chinese may simply be *chin-t'ien*, but the free *chin-t'ien* is considered a substantive<sup>7</sup> rather than an adverb.

<sup>7</sup> Substantives include proper nouns, ordinary nouns, place words, time words, compounds consisting of a determinative (like *i* 一, *liang* 兩, *chê* 這, *pan* 半, *mei* 每) and an auxiliary noun, shortened forms (like *lia* 倆) of such compounds, and certain pronouns. Professor CHAO defines an ordinary noun (not proper noun) as an expression which can be preceded by a compound with such constituents. Time and place words like *chin-t'ien* and *chia-li* 家裏 are not nouns but still substantives. He



Conjunctions<sup>8</sup> like 跟(和,同),或者,雖然,可是,要是,因為,所以 are all bound. It is possible to say *So-i nê* 所以啲 "That is why!" as an exclamation, but even in such a short sentence *so-i* is still bound to *nê*. In sentences like *So-i, t'a chiu pu lai lê* 所以,他就不來了 "Therefore, he is not coming (anymore)" the pause after *so-i* is not a full pause; consequently, it may not be considered free.

To sum up, one may say: In Spoken Chinese, many nouns, most numbers, pronouns, verbs, and adjectives, and all time words, place words, and interjections are free. Auxiliary nouns, adverbs, conjunctions, and particles like *-lê*, *-mê*, *-lai-chê* 來着 are always bound. This applies to compounds as well as to individual characters; in fact, it should be noted that compound nouns are practically always free.<sup>9</sup>

has pointed out to me that in *i-ko-chia-li* 一個家裏 "in one home" the immediate constituents are not 2 + 2 but 3 + 1, where the 3 = 2 + 1.

<sup>8</sup> There is no satisfactory definition of conjunctions in Chinese; therefore, I indicate the class by enumeration.

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion may prove helpful in the study of possible constructions of "minor sentences" in Chinese. The minor sentences, a term used by Professor Y. R. CHAO in contrast with the "full sentence," is a complete communication which does not center in one or more subject-verb (or rather topic-comment) combinations. It corresponds to what Mrs. Jenet Rankin AIKEN calls "nonsentence" in her book entitled *A New Plan of English Grammar*, New York, Holt, 1933, pp. 20-23. A comparison between the minor sentences in Chinese and the nonsentences in English will yield interesting results. For example "Me too" cannot be translated word for word into Chinese. Its equivalent will be *Wo yeh i-yang* 我也一樣 or *Wo yeh* plus the proper verb or adjective, but not *Wo yeh* alone. On the other hand, *Yeh ch'ü* 也去 is a perfect minor sentence in Chinese, meaning "[I (or somebody)] also go" or "I am also going," etc., but "Also go" or "Also going" is not used this way in English.