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“Syntactic Yoga” in Chinese-English Lexicography

David Prager Branner Yuan-Yuan Meng
American Oriental Society Columbia University

ABSTRACT This paper argues that Chinese-English dictionaries should include more thorough part-of-speech notations. Chinese part of speech is recognized to be highly fluid and requires the learner to master what we call “syntactic yoga”: the contortion or exchange of one part of speech into another. It is suggested that this pedagogical technique can be applied to great effect in the construction of dictionary entries.

汉英词典学中的“语法瑜伽”

林德威 孟苑苑
美国东方学会 哥伦比亚大学

提 要 本文主张汉英词典应详细标注词性。众所周知，汉语的词性高度灵活，因此，学习者在使用汉语的过程中，无法避免“语法瑜伽”，也就是在大脑中词性进行扭转或转换。本文认为这种扭转思维的技巧可以有效运用在词书的编撰上。

This paper was delivered as a plenary speech at the 2009 年《康熙字典》

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This paper considers two shortcomings pervading the major Chinese-English dictionaries of the past 30 years: the absence of explicit part-of-speech notations and certain resulting inaccuracies as to how Chinese words are defined or translated into English. It is proposed that the practice of lexicography may be improved through a simple pedagogical method for visualizing the effects in English of part-of-speech changes in Chinese.

The most influential Chinese-English dictionary of the past 30 years has been the 1978 *Hàn-Yīng cídiǎn* 汉英词典 edited by Wú Jǐngróng 吴景荣 (1915—1994). Its crowning authority is seen in the fact that many of its definitions have continued to appear as the core of the large Chinese-English dictionaries published since then. For that reason, methodological decisions made by Wú and his team have had an inordinate effect on Chinese-English lexicography in the intervening decades—decisions such as:

- 1) relying on modern notions of what constitutes a suitable lemma or “headword”;
- 2) writing definitions based on observed usage;
- 3) including examples to document usage.

These decisions are discussed in Wú’s own writings and are not reviewed here.

In many respects, that dictionary was a great advance in Chinese-English lexicography. One matter that in retrospect seems in need of reconsideration, however, is Wú’s decision to omit the more difficult parts of speech of Chinese words. He said: “我们采取标七种词性（助词、象声词、量词、叹词、连词、副词、介词）其余不标的办法。这是因为汉语词性问题比较复杂，其中最难定的是动词、形容词和名词，常常要根据一个词在句子里的功能来定。”（1980：35）

[We chose the method of marking seven parts of speech (particles, onomatopoeic words, measure words, exclamations, conjunctions, adverbs, and coverbs) and

leaving the rest unmarked. That is because parts of speech in Chinese are rather complicated. The hardest of them to assign are the verb, adjective, and noun. It is often necessary to make the decision based on the function of a word in a sentence.]

Wú supported his decision with examples from pre-modern poetry, illustrating words that are typically adjectives appearing in nominal and verbal usages. Of course, in Classical Chinese, which is syntactically a language somewhat distinct from modern Mandarin, this is a very normal state of affairs. As a matter of fact, for an English speaker to learn Classical Chinese is well known to make a great difference in the learning of Mandarin, exactly because it offers more rapid exposure to the fluidity and interchangeability of parts of speech. It is certainly true that the adjective, verb, and noun are the Mandarin parts of speech hardest to pin down. (Transitive and intransitive verbal expressions are also difficult to distinguish accurately in translation, as are issues of suitable collocation, the distinction between adjectives and intransitive verbs, and the relationship of intransitive verbs to their associated nouns.)

But the fact that it is hard to identify Chinese parts of speech does not mean that it is impossible, nor that it is therefore somehow unnecessary. A consequence of Wú’s decision is that a substantial proportion of educated vocabulary in his and successive dictionaries is simply indeterminate as to part of speech (p. o. s.), and ends up being defined or translated in ways that conceal its normal usage in Chinese. By way of example, consider the following *chéngyǔ* 成语, all of which have important verbal usages (below, VP: “verb phrase”), but which are rendered as though they were exclusively noun phrases (N) or complete subjectpredicate sentences. Below, we first offer our own definitions (from Branner and Meng, forthcoming), based on intensive study of recent sources, and then quote the dictionaries first of Wú Jǐngróng and then of Dài and Dài (1991), DeFrancis (2003), and Huì Yǔ (2004), whose definitions are very clearly indebted to Wú’s.

1. 假仁假义. N: pretended kindness; VP: to pretend to be kind and just

source	p. o. s.	definition
Wú Jǐngróng (1978)		— pretended benevolence and righteousness; hypocrisy
Dài and Dài (1991)		— pretended benevolence and righteousness
DeFrancis (2003)	f. e.	hypocrisy

- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 pretended/sham benevolence and righteousness; hypocrisy
2. 冷言冷语. N: sarcastic or icy remarks; VP: to make sarcastic or icy remarks (with 对)
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — sarcastic comments; ironical remarks
- Dài and Dài (1991) — sarcastic comments; ironical remarks
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. sarcastic/ironical remarks
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 sarcastic comments; ironical remarks; cold words
3. 大逆不道. VP: to be morally unacceptable (of actions or things said)
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — treason and heresy; worst offence; outrage
- Dài and Dài (1991) — treason and heresy; worst offense; greatest outrage
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. treason and heresy; worst offense; sedition
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 treason; worst offence; monstrous crime
4. 赤胆忠心. N: intense loyalty; VP: to be intensely loyal (toward leaders, countries, political parties, etc.)
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — utter devotion; wholeheartedness; loyalty
- Dài and Dài (1991) — utter devotion; loyalty
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. utter devotion; loyalty
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 utter devotion; whole-hearted dedication; ardent loyalty; bred-in-the-bone loyalty
5. 风调雨顺. VP: to have good weather for crops
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — good weather for the crops; favourable weather
- Dài and Dài (1991) — favorable weather; good weather for the crops
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. good weather for crops
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 timely wind and rain; favourable weather (for crops)
6. 风云变幻. N: constant changes; VP: to undergo constant change (of mar-

- kets, political and social situations)
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — a changeable situation
- Dài and Dài (1991) — unexpected gathering of clouds; constant change of events (p. 49, under *biànhuàn* 变幻)
- DeFrancis (2003) id. ①changeable situation. ②constant change of events
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 constant change of events; volatile situation
7. 鬼话连篇 . VP: to be full of malarky; to be a pack of lies (of opinions)
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — a pack of lies
- Dài and Dài (1991) — a pack of lies
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. a pack of lies
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 a pack/host of lies; a network of falsehoods; lies from start to finish; a lot of baloney
8. 待人接物 . VP: to interact with people
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — the way one gets along with people
- Dài and Dài (1991) — the way one gets along with people
- DeFrancis (2003) f. e. ①the way one treats people . ②one’s personality
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 way one conducts oneself in relation to others; way one gets along with people
9. 绵里藏针 . VP: to have something powerful or unpleasant concealed behind a deceptively gentle exterior
- Wú Jǐngróng (1978) — a needle hidden in silk floss—a ruthless character behind a gentle appearance; an iron hand in a velvet glove
- Dài and Dài (1991) — a needle hidden in silk floss; a ruthless character behind a gentle appearance; an iron hand in a velvet glove
- DeFrancis (2003) id. iron hand in a velvet glove
- Huì Yǔ (2004) 熟 needle hidden in silk floss—a ruthless character behind a gentle appearance; an iron fist in a velvet glove; a soft appearance

but a dangerous heart

10. 花言巧语. N: cajoling and slightly dishonest things that are said; VP: to say cajoling things in order to fool someone (with 对)

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------|--|
| Wú Jīngróng (1978) | — | sweet words; blandishments |
| Dài and Dài (1991) | — | sweet words; blandishments;
verbal tricks |
| DeFrancis (2003) | f. e. | blandishments |
| Huì Yǔ (2004) | 熟 | sweet/honeyed words; blandishments;
slick talk; luring speech |

11. 人微言轻. VP: to have no clout

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------|--|
| Wú Jīngróng (1978) | — | the words of the lowly carry little weight |
| Dài and Dài (1991) | — | the words of the lowly carry little weight |
| DeFrancis (2003) | f. e. | words of the lowly carry no weight |
| Huì Yǔ (2004) | 熟 | the words of the lowly carry little weight;
when a man is in a low position, his
words go unheeded |

12. 欲壑难填. VP: to be insatiably greedy

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------|---|
| Wú Jīngróng (1978) | — | greed is like a valley that can never be
filled; avarice knows no bounds |
| Dài and Dài (1991) | — | greed is like a valley that can never be
filled; avarice knows no bounds |
| DeFrancis (2003) | f. e. | avarice knows no bounds |
| Huì Yǔ (2004) | 熟 | greed is a valley that can never be filled;
avarice knows no bounds |

13. 死有余辜. VP: to be so evil that death is too good for one

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------|--|
| Wú Jīngróng (1978) | — | even death would be too good for him; e-
ven death would not expiate all his crimes |
| Dài and Dài (1991) | — | Even death would not expiate all his
crimes (p. 327, under gū 辜) |
| DeFrancis (2003) | f. e. | even death would not expiate all his crimes |
| Huì Yǔ (2004) | 熟 | the crime calls for more than death-even
death would not expiate sb's crimes |

Wú as well as Dài and Dài supply no parts of speech at all in these entries. DeFrancis and Huì give explicit parts of speech for many ordinary words, but not for idi-

oms; DeFrancis gives “f. e.” or “id.” for “fixed expression” or “idiom” and Hui gives only *shú* 熟 for *shúyǔ* 熟语 “idiom”, none of which is a true part of speech. Note, however, that in each case, the definitions and translations consist either of English noun phrases or complete English sentences, either of which leads the Anglophone reader to draw the wrong conclusion about the common usage and meaning of these words. This list could be extended to thousands of items.

Let us clarify two points. First, we do not dispute that *in origin* many of these expressions are noun phrases or subject-predicate sentences, and can still be used as such. What we dispute is that the most useful way to define them is exclusively by that literal, original meaning; far more useful is to render them as the reader will often encounter them, which often means as verb phrases. When Dōngfāng Yīng 东方英 writes, “你我人微言轻, 所说的话, 只怕无人相信...” (n. d.), we must translate it along the lines of “You and I have no clout and I fear no one will believe what we say...” The phrase is indeed sometimes used as a subjectless “comment” (in “topic-comment” structure), but to define it as though that were its only usage, making it seem to be a *yànyǔ* 谚语 “maxim”, is to misrepresent both its register and its normal syntactic function in living Chinese. When Sū Tóng 苏童 writes, “你别看纪太太对你冷言冷语的, 她心里对你很亲的...” (2008: 128), we must render it as something like “Don’t imagine that Mrs. Ji is being cold to you; she feels very close to you...” And so on.

Second, Chinese parts of speech are clearly far more fluid than parts of speech in English. Many eminent Chinese scholars continue to feel, with Wú Jīngróng, that such fluidity rules out any possibility of exactitude in Chinese lexicography. We hold, however, that whether or not it is “possible”, it remains a useful goal that can be approached, simply as a practical matter. No one doubts that Chinese exhibits regular behavior that can be observed and described. It has its own distinctive qualities, but we need not abandon descriptive linguistics and turn to mysticism or nationalism to explain them. Concretely, because of the isolating nature of Chinese, a given expression in its different parts of speech often has not one but several English meanings and translations. For that reason, it is our view that Chinese p. o. s. is most effectively treated not as an intrinsic characteristic of each word, but as the observed function of that word in specific contexts. One expression may thus be assigned two or more parts of speech, defined by differences in syntactic context rather than form.

This fluidity of Chinese parts of speech and the resulting contortion of English

renderings is the key problem in Chinese-English translation and lexicography. (The problem is not necessarily unique there; see Chén Ruìguó 1994 for a stimulating paper involving purely Chinese examples.) We propose that this problem can be constructively addressed through the adoption of a simple pedagogical technique. As teachers of Chinese, we try to inculcate a conception that may be termed “syntactic yoga”: using the metaphor of yoga, the different parts of speech produced by mental twisting are compared to different *asanas* (poses or 体式) assumed by the body’s twisting, yet the differences between poses are considered superficial to a fundamental inner unity. The seemingly different parts of speech and definitions, which may be phrased very differently in English, are like outward *asanas*; the unchanging Chinese word may be compared to the inner state of the yogi.

Practically speaking, then, how does one practice this “syntactic yoga”, and how should it be applied to the processes of lexicography?

Take an ordinary noun, such as *guǎnjiāpó* 管家婆 “bossy woman”. As a noun, it has various syntactic functions that are characteristic of nouns, such as taking number and demonstrative pronouns (both with measure words). It also has a definition that can be identified as nominal by inspection. But *guǎnjiāpó* also sometimes functions as an adjective, meaning that it can take adverbs of degree and assume a meaning that can be identified as adjectival by inspection. When a noun functions as an adjective, its meaning changes in a particular way: whereas the original noun is the name of a person, place, or thing, the adjective generally means “possessing or reflecting characteristics of” that original person, place, or thing. As an adjective, then *guǎnjiāpó* means “bossy”. There is really only one word involved, but its part of speech and meaning change with its syntactic function; English makes those changes patent, like a yogi changing from one pose to another.

As another example, consider the noun *Zhōngguó* 中国 “China”. When it functions adjectivally, we can define it “very Chinese” or “typically Chinese”-again, “possessing or reflecting characteristics of” China. A recent phrase often repeated about Shànghǎi is “看上去很西化, 骨子里很中国” [It is very Western to look at, but very Chinese in its bones] (Anon). (Examples involving place-words are legion; recall the poet Yú Guāngzhōng’s 余光中 line “星空, 非常希腊” [The starry skies, very Greek. . .]) With these usages of *Zhōngguó*, we are again dealing with one word, contorted into two different “poses”-two different parts of speech and meanings.

The patterns by which various parts of speech change into one another may be summarized as follows: Beginning with a noun (N), which names a person, place, or thing, “X”:

- a derived adjective (Adj) generally means “possessing or reflecting characteristics of X”;

管家婆, 中国: (see text above)

傻气 N: air of foolishness

Adj: foolish (derivation: possessing the quality “air of foolishness”)

- a derived intransitive verb (VI) generally means “to act or exist in a way reflecting characteristic X”;

招风耳 N: ears that stick out

VI: to have ears that stick out (derivation: to exhibit the characteristic “ears that stick out”)

病 N: illness

VI: to be or become sick (derivation: to exhibit the characteristic “illness”)

- a derived transitive verb (VT) generally means “to impose X on [Object]” or “to treat [object] with X”.

单恋 N: unrequited love

VT: to love unrequitedly (derivation: to impose “unrequited love” on [Object])

反感 N: disgust, feeling of aversion

VT: to hate (derivation: to treat [Object] with “disgust, feeling of aversion”)

Somewhat nonstandard; example: “大家都反感他的古怪, 进而就看不起他了。”

[Everyone hated his eccentricity and so we looked down on him]

Beginning with an adjective, meaning “possessing some quality, X”:

- a derived noun generally means “that quality, X”;

诚实 Adj: honest

N: honesty (derivation: the quality of being “honest”)

麻烦 Adj: annoying, troublesome

N: annoyance, nuisance, trouble (derivation: one that possesses the quality of being “annoying”)

• a derived intransitive verb generally means “to act or exist in a way reflecting quality X”;

忙 Adj: busy

VI: to be busy, be occupied with busywork (derivation: to exhibit the characteristic of being “busy”)

• a derived transitive verb generally means “to impose one’s own state of X on [Object]” or “to treat [Object] with state X”;

酸 Adj: sarcastic, caustic, bitter

VT: to be sarcastic toward (derivation: to impose one’s own state of being “embittered” on [Object]) . Somewhat nonstandard; example: “酸他几句。”

[to say a few sarcastic things to him]

麻烦 Adj: annoying, troublesome

VT: to bother, put to trouble (derivation: to impose one’s own state of being “annoying” on [Object])

忙 Adj: busy

VT: to be busy with (derivation: to impose one’s own state of being “busy” on [Object]) Somewhat nonstandard; example: “湖南高校”急嫁族“激增; 大四女生不忙工作忙征婚” [The “in a hurry to marry” species in Hunan’s colleges and universities is sharply on the increase-senior college women are busy looking for husbands rather than work]

凶 Adj: fierce

VT: to scold fiercely (derivation: to treat [Object] with “fierceness”)

Beginning with a verb, meaning “to perform some act, X”;

• a derived noun generally means “the act X” or “one that performs the act X”;

主使 VT: to mastermind

N: mastermind; the principal planner of a crime or political incident (derivation: one who “masterminds”)

算计 VI: to calculate; VT. to plot against or carry out a plot against

N: calculation, scheming (derivation: the quality of “being calculating” or “plotting against”)

• a derived adjective generally means “having characteristics of performing act X”;

节约 VT: to save on, make economical use of

Adj: thrifty, frugal (derivation: having characteristics of “saving”)

自谦 VI: to practice self-effacement

Adj: self-effacing (derivation: having characteristics of “practicing self-effacement”)

算计 VI: to calculate

Adj: calculating (derivation: having the characteristics of “to calculate”)

• a transitive verb derived from an intransitive verb X generally means “to perform the action X on [Object]” ;

算计 VI: to calculate

VT. to plot against or carry out a plot against (to perform the action of “calculating” on [Object])

Note that which meaning one starts with does not have to match the historical evolution of those meanings. Also, derived meanings are by no means necessarily standard, and many inevitably even prove not to be attested in actual usage. For the student who is learning to interpret Chinese passively without necessarily producing it, these changes of function are simple enough to master. For the lexicographer, however, it is also valuable to apply syntactic yoga productively: to try to produce adjectives and verbs from an original noun, to try to produce nouns from original adjectives and verbs, and so on, in order to ensure that valid usages of each word are not being overlooked because the compilers have not happened to think of them.

Our recommendation is not that every such derivation should be included in a dictionary. The decisive criterion should be whether or not the derived usage is sufficiently common to merit inclusion—a principle whose precise application may differ from dictionary to dictionary. But we think that the basic principle of trying to anticipate what derived semantic functions *may* exist, and then examining living corpora to see whether they *do* exist, is sound. It would prevent the overlooking of many active usages and improve the utility of dictionaries.

The need for marking parts of speech in a Chinese-English dictionary is two-fold: From the point of view of Chinese usage, since part of speech can certainly vary in Chinese, part of speech notations are necessary to ensure that the Chinese usage being described is correct. From the point of view of English renderings, since English translations and definitions inevitably vary as Chinese usage varies, part of speech notations for the Chinese are also necessary to distinguish among English

translations for varying Chinese usages.

There is another issue, deriving from these two: The learner of Chinese will fail to learn usage correctly if parts of speech are not marked, and the learner of English will fail to learn correct translations if varying Chinese usages are not reflected in the English. As teachers of Chinese, we are especially concerned about the effect that incomplete dictionary translations have on learners. Dictionaries, in whatever form, are one of the fundamental tools of the serious language student. They should continually be improved with that function in mind.

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