

A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Japanese Homomorphic Words

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In the process of language exchange between China and Japan, Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words, as a special textual phenomenon, have attracted extensive attention from linguists. Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words can be divided into homophonic synonyms, homophonic near-synonyms, and homophonic polysemous words. Correctly classifying Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words and clarifying the meaning and usage of homonyms can help deepen Chinese and Japanese language learners' understanding of homographs, improve the accuracy of translation, and promote cross-cultural communication and language proficiency.

Keywords: Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words, comparative analysis, homophonic polysemous words, Chinese vocabulary, Japanese vocabulary

Introduction

The existence of Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words enriches linguistic expressions and provides a unique perspective for comparative language study. But at the same time, it may also bring some confusion to language learners. In this paper, the Chinese and Japanese homomorphic word “下手”, which is both universal and widely used, is chosen as the object of study, and the differences and similarities in the usage and meaning of this homograph in the two languages are compared and analyzed, with a view to providing a reference for Chinese-Japanese language learning.

Definition of Chinese and Japanese Homomorphic Words

Regarding Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words, there is still no universally accepted definition in the academic community. Domestically, Zhao Futang (1983) firstly put forward three elements that can be recognized as homographs, namely, Chinese characters in Japanese that have the same word forms as those in Chinese; Chinese characters in the stem of a Japanese word that are comparable to those in Chinese; and simplified Chinese characters in both Japanese and Chinese that are always reduced to traditional characters for comparison.

Since then, there are still scholars continuing to research and summarize this, and the one that is more widely recognized in the academic community is the method of defining Sino-Japanese homographs pointed out by Pan Jun (1995) in his article. According to him, there are three necessary conditions for identifying Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words, the epithet should be the same Chinese character, it should have the same origin and historical association, and it should still be used in both languages.

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In conclusion, Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words refer to words that exist and are still used in Chinese and Japanese respectively, that have the same glyphs or that correspond to simplified and traditional Chinese characters, and that are related to each other (in terms of meaning, lexical properties, structure, historical origin, etc.).

The Creation of Chinese and Japanese Homomorphic Words

Language contact refers to the effects of frequent exchanges between different languages or dialects within the same language. This phenomenon is usually caused by trade, cultural exchanges, and the mixing of immigrants. One of the common cases of language contact is borrowing.

Song Chunju (2003) pointed out that Japan originally did not have its own script, and that kanji, which was introduced to Japan through Korea, was accepted by Japan and used as a script for recording the Japanese language. Although Japan later created kana on the basis of kanji and had its own national script, kanji still dominated the Japanese script. From the point of view of Japanese vocabulary, modern Japanese still retains many Chinese characters and Chinese words, and many of them have basically the same glyphs, except that their pronunciation is different from that of modern Chinese. Therefore, we call these words with the same glyphs in the Chinese and Japanese scripts Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words.

Through lexical borrowing, the phenomenon of homographs came into being. A large number of Chinese words were imported into Japan and formed part of the Japanese language system. Similarly, Japanese words created in Japan based on Chinese characters were imported into China. The term “Wasei Kango” refers to the new words borrowed from Japanese in modern Chinese, and since the end of the 19th century, a large number of “Wasei Kango” from Japanese have flowed into China and become foreign words in Chinese. He Peizhong and Feng Jianxin (1986) pointed out that after the Meiji Restoration, Japan began to learn from the advanced culture of the West, introduced a large number of advanced science and technology, and created a lot of “Wasei Kango” to be used as the translation vocabulary for scientific and technological terms. A large number of these words were transferred back to the Chinese language and incorporated into the Chinese system.

Classification of Chinese and Japanese Homomorphic Words

In the process of lexical borrowing, the original meanings of words are either retained or discarded, and there are also cases of expansion or semantic transfer, which further creates the homophonic polysemous words. Chen Miao (2018), in his research paper, classified homophonic synonyms, homophonic near-synonyms, and homophonic polysemous words, based on the classification of word forms and meanings of Chinese and Japanese homomorphic words. Words with the same character form (including the correspondence between simplified and traditional Chinese characters) and basically similar meanings can be regarded as homomorphic synonyms, while homophonic polysemous words, as the name suggests, are words with the same character form, but their meanings and lexical properties are quite different, and their meanings are not related in the two linguistic environments. What is more complicated is the homophonic near-synonyms between the first two, which have similar meanings, but there are differences, such as the scope of use that cannot be ignored.

According to the definition of the above classification, “下手” in the selected area of this study is a commonly used word in both Chinese and Japanese, and this comparative study has a wide range of practical application value, which can provide reference for more language learners. The Chinese word “下手” and Japanese word “下手” belong to the category of homophonic polysemous words, which are identical in both languages, but differ greatly in meaning. The detailed comparative analysis of this word can deeply explore how

the cultural differences between China and Japan affect language expression and comprehension, help to reveal the difficulties and challenges in language learning, demonstrate the methodology and value of cross-linguistic comparative research, and enhance language learners' understanding of the interactions and influences between languages, thus providing new cases for language research. It provides a new case study for language research.

A Comparative Study

Based on a search of the 7th edition of *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, online authoritative Chinese dictionary websites and *Daijisen Jpn-Jpn Dictionary* (Shogakukan), we have compiled the meanings of these two words as follows.

The Meaning and Usage of the Chinese Word “下手”

As a noun:

1. Assistant.

Example: 打下手 (Give sb. a hand.)

2. The person who sits on the lower part of the seat, the right side.

Example: 坐在主人的下手 (Sit on the master's right.)

3. The position below or behind. Also known as “下首”.

4. Refers to people with low knowledge and skills.

5. The person whose turn is next in a game, gambling or drinking game. Also known as the “下家”.

As a verb:

6. Do-it-yourself.

Example: 不知从何下手 (Don't know where to start.)

7. Committing a crime.

8. Kill; get rid of.

The Meaning and Usage of the Japanese Word “下手”

There are three kana expressions for “下手” in Japanese: へた (heta), したて (sitate), and しもて (simote).

As a noun:

9. Below position/direction. Downwind, downstream. Lower hand held.

10. (Sumo) Grab the opponent's belt (hand) from the inside of the opponent's outstretched arm.

11. In “Inu ou mono (A type of mounted archery activity)”, the archer standing behind his own horse.

12. Stage right, stage left as viewed from the auditorium.

As an adjective verb:

13. clumsily, ineptly.

Example: 下手な画工が描きそうな景色 (It looks like a landscape painted by a poor artist.)

14. If someone falls by the wayside, they fail to finish an activity.

15. (set phrase) Humble.

Example: 下手に出る

Comparison of Meaning and Usage

The Chinese word “下手” and the Japanese word “下手” are both nouns with similar meanings in terms

of “low status” and “position down or to the right”, but the meanings of the two words cannot be matched in Chinese and Japanese, and both words have independent meanings derived from their respective language environments and language evolution. However, in Chinese and Japanese, the meanings of the words do not correspond to each other, and both words have independent meanings derived from their respective linguistic environments and the process of linguistic evolution, which is easy to cause interference for foreign language learners.

When used as a noun, the Chinese word “下手” has the meaning of “assistant/the person below the seat, the right side/the person whose turn comes next in a game, gambling or drinking game”. This is a unique Chinese term that has no equivalent in Japanese. The two meanings of the Japanese word “下手”, “(sumo) the hand that grabs the opponent’s belt from the inside of the opponent’s outstretched arm/In ‘Inu ou mono (A type of mounted archery activity)’” have no counterparts in Chinese, either. The above two cultural backgrounds are unique to Japan and have no counterpart in Chinese culture, and the word “下手” has been borrowed and given a unique meaning in the Japanese language system.

The Chinese word “下手” means “below or behind” and the Japanese word “下手” has similar meanings, while the latter has a more limited scope of application, such as the direction of a natural object, such as a section of a current or the direction of the wind. There is also an overlapping and inclusive relationship between “a person with low knowledge or skill” and the Japanese phrase “a player of low rank and low ability in Go and Shogi”, with the former having a broader scope of reference.

The Chinese word “下手” also has a verb form. On the other hand, the Japanese word “下手” is an adjective verb, which serves as a modifier. Although the lexemes and meanings of the words are completely different, it is not difficult to find out that both these two words have negative connotations. In addition, there is a fixed usage of “下手に出る”, so it is not necessary to split it when translating, but to translate it as a whole to mean “humility”.

From this, we can see that the Japanese language has borrowed the Chinese word “下手” in the process of retaining part of the meaning of the word, and more accurately limiting the scope of the referent, and deriving new meanings and uses under the influence of the country’s cultural and social environments.

Conclusions

On the basis of a brief discussion on the definition, causes, and classification of Chinese and Japanese homonyms, this paper compares the Chinese and Japanese homomorphic word “下手” and analyses the evolution of their meanings in the two languages. It can be seen that although the two words do not have equivalent meanings, they are similar in terms of the scope of reference and the meaning of the words, and they have their own unique meanings in their respective linguistic environments.

Therefore, when translating, you should firstly collate the meanings of homonyms and sort out the same, similar, and different meanings, and then choose the correct meaning of the word according to the context of the sentence and the context in which it is placed. Sometimes additional analysis or confirmation may be required to determine the correct translation. Language learners should pay attention to the logical relationship between the preceding and following texts, themes, etc., to accurately understand and translate the different meanings of homonyms.

Comparing homonyms in Chinese and Japanese highlights their differences in meaning, usage, and language structure, which helps learners understand the differences between the two languages and develop language analysis skills and understanding of different language systems.

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