



## On the “Morpheme” Concept in Chinese Linguistics

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### **Abstract**

This article is devoted to the study of morphemes in modern Chinese. The doctrine of morphemes, considered as the smallest units by meaning, is usually included in morphology, which is sometimes allocated in a separate section called morphemics. The object of study of morphemics is not only the grammatical morphemes themselves (formative and inflectional), but also word-forming ones.

**Keywords:** *Word Formation; Affixation, Morpheme; Functional Words; Significant Words; Significant Part of the Word; Phoneme*

### **Introduction**

The word as an object of word-formation analysis consists of so-called “morphemes”, units with a limited meaning. Several definitions of a morpheme are given in general linguistics. V. Solntsev by highlighting the most common features expressing a different understanding of this term, described them as follows:

For the Vandriese morpheme, the main characteristic feature is service: morphemes are any auxiliary means of the language up to intonation, stress and location;

For Bloomfield's morphemes, the main feature is minimality: morphemes are the shortest meaningful segments, regardless of their role and place in the language system and regardless of their relationship to other units (both simple words, and auxiliary words, and parts of words);

For Baudouin's morphemes, a characteristic feature is their minimality, combined with an indication of their place in the language system and their relationship to other units: morphemes are the minimum meaningful parts of a word [5].

It would be logical to define a morpheme as the smallest part of a word that makes sense. This understanding allows us to formulate the problem of selecting a word in the form of a relation “morpheme – word – phrase”. A detailed analysis of this conclusion is presented in a number of works by V. Solntsev.

The opinions of Chinese linguists regarding the morpheme differ. In particular, some linguists, when describing this unit, emphasize the word-formation possibility of the morpheme and consider the morpheme as a word-formation unit with meaning [7].

Researchers Zhu Dexi [13] and Gao Mingkai [10] define a morpheme as the smallest meaningful unit of a language. When defining morphemes, the presence of a form or meaning in them is usually taken into account. In other words, it is seen as a “two-sided unit, inseparable in meaning” [11]. This approach to the morpheme is reflected in the definitions of Zhang Zhigun [12], Zhang Jin [11], Liu Shuxia [14]. In particular, Zhang Jin writes: “A morpheme is the smallest word-formation unit that has sound and meaning” [11]. Thus, three main features of a morpheme can be distinguished: 1) sound design; 2) the presence of meaning; 3) the inability to divide into smaller parts in terms of meaning.

The doctrine of morphemes, considered as the smallest units by meaning, is usually included in morphology, which is sometimes allocated in a separate section called morphemics. The object of study of morphemics is not only the grammatical morphemes themselves (formative and inflectional), but also word-forming ones.

Considering word formation as a section of grammar, some linguists single out the doctrine of word-formation morphemes, using the term “word-formation morphemics” [7]. In recent years, linguists have singled out morphemics as a separate independent section along with phonetics, lexicology, word formation, morphology and other sections. According to the definition of O. Akhmanova, morphemic is “a branch of morphology that deals with the description of morphological models of the language, that is, the structure of morphemes and the patterns of their distribution in broader sequences” [1].

### **Main Part**

A general description of morphemes, their classification according to various features, the features of the combination of morphemes in words - all this is closely related to a common problem - the study of the morphemic structure of a word as a subject of word formation and morphology. So, under the *morphemic structure of the word*, we understand “the relationship of its significant parts, morphemes, arranged in a certain sequence, interconnected according to certain laws of the language.” Under the morphemic analysis of a word is meant the division of a word into morphemes by comparing them with homogeneous, monosyllabic words of various structures, determining the characteristics of the shared morphemes and the connections between them. In other words, the morphemic analysis of a word means the determination of its morphemic composition” [7].

Morphemes of any language are characterized by a number of common features, according to these features they differ from other languages in sound, syllable, word, phrase, sentence. In particular, a morpheme differs from sounds by the presence of grammatical and derivational meanings. Morphemes are single phonemes or sequences of phonemes. In a sequence of morphemes, a morpheme may or may not match a word or syllable.

In different languages, certain patterns of correlation of morphemes with other units of the language are observed. For example, the Uzbek or Russian languages are characterized by a mismatch of a morpheme with a word or a morpheme with a syllable. As for the Chinese language and similar languages, such compatibility is natural.

Describing the morphemes of the Chinese language and other languages of the countries of the Far East and Southeast Asia, N. Solntsev writes: “In these areal languages, the morpheme, as a rule, corresponds to the syllable in sound terms, which was interpreted in the form of a law on the morphological significance of syllabic division. Syllables in these languages have a clear structure that determines the invariance of the syllabic composition. As long as every unchangeable syllable is used as the sound shell of a morpheme, this means that no morpheme can change. Each change in the syllabic shell, without words, reflects a different syllable, that is, a different morpheme or a different word.

In Chinese, as in languages with a similar typology, there is a separate description of the hierarchical relationship between the syllable and the morpheme, as well as between the morpheme and the word. The inability to distinguish between a simple word and a morpheme from the outside is also observed in different languages. In Chinese, these are more monosyllabic words. Some researchers believe that an important typological feature of the Chinese language is the impossibility of distinguishing a morpheme as a distinctive element from a word in terms of its properties [4].

The morpheme of the Chinese language has some other features that distinguish it from the morphemes of other languages. In particular, for example, one unit of the Chinese language in one case can be a word, and in another it can be used only as a morpheme. At the same time, due to the complex relationship between the ancient and modern language, Chinese morphemes in some cases may also have derivational adjectives. At the same time, the morphemes of the Chinese language, like the morphemes of other languages, differ from phrases and sentences in that they do not break up into smaller semantic fragments, cannot act as a sentence and its parts. The morpheme of the Chinese language has a number of distinctive features that make it possible to classify these features according to their essence, role in word formation, place in the word in comparison with other morphemes, functions and other functions.

The most detailed classification of Chinese morphemes is given in Zhang Zhigun's article "On the Chinese language morpheme" and the textbook "Modern Chinese" edited by him.

Zhang Zhigun draws attention first of all to the fact that one of the main features inherent in the morpheme of the Chinese language is its monosyllabic character. The morpheme of modern Chinese is one toned syllable written in one character, he notes [12].

Yin Bingyong calculated that 97% of modern Chinese morphemes are monosyllabic. That is why Zhang Zhigun first gives a description of monosyllabic morphemes. *Monosyllabic morphemes of the Chinese language are subdivided according to the degree of connection into free, semi-free and non-free.*

Free morphemes are morphemes that can act as words and create new words along with other morphemes. For example: 花 “hua” – “flower”: 花环 “huahuan” – “wreath”, 花纹 “huawen” – “pattern”, 荷花 “hehua” – “Lotus flower”, 礼花 “lihua” – “holiday fireworks”;

跑 “pao” – “run”: 跑道 “paodao” – “airstrip”, 跑鞋 “paoxie” – “running shoes”, 跑表 “paobiao” – “stopwatch”, 逃跑 “taopao” – “to run”, “runaway”, 小跑 “xiaopao” – “run slowly”, “jogtrot”, 赛跑 “saipao” – “running”, “running competition”;

硬 “ying” – “solid”: 硬结 “yingjie” – “to solidify”, 硬币 “yingbi” – “metal coins”, 硬手 “yingshou” – “master”, “skillful worker”, 硬化 “yinghua” – “hardening”, 生硬 “shengying” – “scabrous”, 强硬 “qiangying” – “strong”, “resolute”.

Semi-free morphemes cannot act as words, but together with other morphemes they can form non-free words. For example: 牧 “mu”: 牧草 “mucao” – “grass”, “forage grass”, 牧场 “muchang” – “pasture”, “pastureland”, 牧人 “muren” – “shepherd”, 牧业 “muye” – “cattle breeding”, 放牧 “fangmu” – “graze”, 游牧 “youmu” – “nomad”.

基 “ji” – “basis”: 基石 “jishi” – “basis”, 基金 “jijin” – “fund”, “capital”, 基地 “jidi” – “base”, 基质 “jizhi” – “substrate”, 地基 “diji” – “plot”, 根基 “genji” – “substructure”, foundation.

Free and semi-free form the majority of monosyllabic morphemes in modern Chinese. Yin Binyun's research shows that 49% of monosyllabic morphemes are free.

The status of Chinese morphemes in the process of its historical development is not in a stable state. Many of the free morphemes of Old Chinese evolved over time into semi-free morphemes. Changes of this type are directly related to the tendency of the vocabulary of the modern Chinese language to move from monosyllabic to polysyllabic. Part of the morphemes of the ancient Chinese language with an independent meaning gradually transformed into official or semi-functional morphemes. The changes that

occur with morphemes in the process of the historical development of the Chinese language do not always have clear boundaries and frameworks. The process of changing the status of morphemes in Chinese, as in other languages, is lengthy and complex [7].

Modern Chinese is limited by the word-formation property of two-syllable and polysyllabic morphemes, some do not even have this property. Their presence in the language does not affect one of the main features of the modern Chinese language - the monosyllabic nature of morphemes.

According to the meaning and role in word formation, root and service morphemes are distinguished. The root morpheme is the main, central part of the word, expressing the main lexical content. All other service morphemes only change the appearance of the stem, concretize its meaning, that is, they express the various grammatical or word-building content of the word. Root morphemes are called lexical or semantic.

In linguistics, it is not uncommon for certain grammatical or word-building meanings to be expressed by the absence of any sounds or sound associations in the composition of the word. In such cases, one speaks of expressing certain meanings with the help of a null morpheme. At one time, Fortunatov [6] pointed out that not only because grammatical forms can be formed with the presence of affixes in words, but also because they can be formed without any affixes in the same forms as in other words: "Every form of words formed by affixes," wrote F. F. Fortunatov. He suggests the existence of another form in which the same stems appear without a given affix, that is, either with a different affix, or without any affix, as the stems of words in a different form [6].

N. Shansky [8] characterizes the zero morpheme as a materially unreflected part of the word, which stands out in the word in comparison with correlative forms that have the same series of materially reflected morphemes.

## **Conclusion**

In linguistics, word-building, form-building and inflectional morphemes are distinguished.

In the Chinese language, the question of the form represented by a zero morpheme or a zero morpheme is, to one degree or another, considered in the works of N. Korotkov [2], S. Yakhontov [9], N. Solntseva and V. Solntsev [4]. This problem occupies a special place among the complex and controversial issues of the Chinese language. Without going into the essence of all the discussions related to the problem, we note that in all works on the Chinese language, the discussion was about the formative zero morphemes. However, the term "word-building zero morpheme" has recently begun to appear (for example, in Guo Lianfu's article "Prefixes and Suffixes of Modern Chinese") [7]. The selection of a null morpheme is conditional. The fact is that the recognition of a zero morpheme contradicts the generally accepted idea of a morpheme as a linguistic unit, characterized by the presence of form, content and meaning in it.

Based on the foregoing, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) A morpheme in Chinese has three main features: sound design; having meaning; the inability to break it into smaller semantic parts; the morpheme of the Chinese language has some more features that distinguish it from the morphemes of other languages. In particular, one unit of the Chinese language in one case can be a word, and in another it can be used only as a morpheme. 2) In Chinese, the concept of a hieroglyph is closely related to a morpheme. In Chinese, all morphemes are divided into independent in meaning, semi-functional and auxiliary morphemes. 3) According to the meaning and role in word formation, root and auxiliary morphemes are distinguished. 4) Depending on the function performed, service morphemes are divided into derivational and grammatical (inflectional, formative) morphemes. 5) One-syllable morphemes of the Chinese language, depending on the degree of their compatibility, are divided into free, semi-complex and non-free.

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