RESEARCH ARTICLE

LIMITATIONS OF COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL METHOD IN CHINESE STUDIES

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Abstract

Comparative-historical method was a language research method from 18th century to 19th century, which played an important role in exploring Indo-European Family. However, due to the characteristics of Chinese, there are some difficulties in applying this method to Chinese. Based on the characteristics of Chinese, this article explains the difficulty of applying competitive-historical method to Chinese, which is mainly reflected in the following four aspects: single form, indistinguishable meaning, multi-meaning characters, and lack of relative language to compare. Also, the author hope to provide some new insights for people to research Chinese.

Key Words: Historical Comparison, Chinese, Indo-European Family, Language

Historical comparative linguistics in the 19th century was a discipline that researched the kinship of language and its historical development by method of comparative-historical method. Comparative-historical method is a set of scientific research methods used in linguistics to research the kinship of languages or dialects, reconstruct the history, and expose their development rules from the basic period to the later periods. The comparative-historical method has played a great role in Indo-European Family, however, due to the differences in languages, its application in Chinese has been greatly hindered.

1. Chinese Vocabulary Has Single Form

William jones discovered that Sanskrit and European languages have great similarities in morphology, and put forward the famous "Indo-European Hypothesis". According to the linguistic arbitrariness, we can know that there is no inevitable connection between the sound and meaning of language symbols, and it is impossible for such a large-scale correspondence to be

loanwords, so there is only one possibility, that is, the same origin. Meyer (1957) pointed out, only the form can be used as evidence to determine the continuity between common language and future generations.

The pronunciation and vocabulary are relatively easy to change, but the characteristics of the form are not easy to change. For example, in some native languages in northern France, only some morphological local features remain, such as the difference between masculine and feminine. The official French language is "il dit (he said)", "elle dit (she said)", but they say "i dit", "a dit". This kind of special fact is learned from an early age and unconsciously becomes a habit. Although everything else changes, these special facts can remain unchanged.

Chinese relies on function words and word order to express its grammatical meaning, without any morphological changes. Therefore, if you want to find out some languages that are related to Chinese or Chinese dialects from the characteristics

of morphology, there is nothing to rely on. Like the Tocharian language and Hittite language discovered before, we can see its Indo-European characteristics with a little textual research. Therefore, a language with complicated form, is naturally easier to verify its kinship; A simple language, is difficult to find strong evidence. The competitive-historical method has two objective basis: first, the arbitrariness of the combination of sound and meaning; second, the regularity of phonetic correspondence. Morphological similarity is not the objective basis of comparative-historical method. The reason why it is of great value in determining the homologous relationship of languages is that it can be put into the framework of phonetic correspondence.

2. Pronunciation Cannot Completely Distinguish Meaning

Almost all words in Indo-European languages have different phonetic forms and pronunciations. When using competitive-historical method, we only need to compare the present pronunciation with the past pronunciation of a word, or compare the past pronunciation with the present pronunciation of the words with the same meaning in relative languages, and we can draw a conclusion. Of course, there are some words with the same form, pronunciation and different meanings, but they are individual cases, so I won't repeat them too much.

Bloomfield (1980) pointed out, people know how to compare the various components, so the similarities that can only be roughly seen in the past can be definitely and accurately explained. At the same time, he said, in order to do a good job of comparing these languages, people must have descriptions of each language. This shows that to make historical comparison, it is necessary to take phonetic description as the basis. That's because in Indo-European languages, the change of phonetic form represents the change of meaning, such as meet-meat, bad-bed, cup-cap, with different forms and completely different meanings.

Chinese is different, Although we can describe the pronunciation of Chinese with the help of reference books such as rhyme books, it is not very useful. Because in Chinese, pronunciation can not completely distinguish the meaning. For

example, Chinese phonetic alphabet "xī", which corresponds to Chinese characters such as 西, 希, 锡, 兮, etc. Among these homophones, some are roots and some are affixes, so this description can not be done. Phonetic description which can't distinguish the meaning difference has no meaning in historical comparison.

3. Chinese Character Has Multi-Meaning

As mentioned, the historical comparison method is based on phonetic description. Indo-European language is phonography, and the pictograph and phonetic element are unified. When we see the pictograph, we can read its sound. We can only rely on written materials to study the sounds in history. It can be said that the written materials in Indo-European really restore the pronunciation, which can make the competitive-historical method play a greater role.

In Chinese, pictograph, ideograph and associative characters record meaning, while pictophonetic characters have tangible pictograph and phonetic element. Generally speaking, tangible pictograph represents the meaning, phonetic element represents the pronunciation. However, the phonetic element do not all represent pronunciation. Some express both sound and meaning. Referring to the existing materials, this is by no means an isolated phenomenon. According to this phenomenon, Yu Yongmei (1995) put forward, Chinese is a symbol system of double heterogeneous signifiers. Therefore, Chinese characters hardly record pronunciation, which makes the historical comparison method greatly hindered.

4. Comparable Relatives Have Less Language

The object of historical comparison is relative language, and the family like Indo-European language is very large, which differentiates Germanic language family, Romance language family, Greek language family, etc., and these language families are differentiated under each family. Therefore, this lays the foundation and provides materials for historical comparison.

However, up to now, Chinese is still an independent language family. There are a lot of

Lei Shen

loanwords between it and Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tibetan, etc., so it is difficult to judge whether they are related. Moreover, these languages lack recorded materials, which also poses a big problem for historical comparison. Of course, there are many dialects in Chinese, which we can also refer to, but strictly speaking, dialects are not independent languages, but only regional variants of Chinese. Although the competitive-historical method is helpful to investigate the phonetic situation among the various variants of the same language, it is of little significance to master the general characteristics of the language, so it cannot be said that Chinese has sufficient materials for historical comparison. As Meillet (1925) said, Every fact in a language is a part of a closely related whole. We should not compare one trivial fact with another trivial fact, but should compare one language system with another.

5. Summary

The competitive-historical method has made a great breakthrough in Indo-European language, while Chinese has the limitations due to its characteristics, mainly the four aspects: single form, indistinguishable meaning, multi-meaning characters, and lack of relative language to compare.

However, it is not to say that the application of this method in Chinese is meaningless. For example, Qian Daxin and others have reached the conclusion that "there is no light lip sound or upper tongue sound in Chinese ancient times" based on harmonic component materials. We can prove that his conclusion is correct by using dialect as material and competitive-historical method. Another example is that Gao Benhan used modern dialect and competitive-historical method to prove Chinese mid-ancient phonetic system, then deduced the Chinese ancient phonetic system, and completed the phonetic construction of the med-ancient phonetic system and the ancient phonetic system respectively. Therefore, we can't say that the competitive-historical method is not suitable for the Chinese. We can only say that we should consider many factors and try our best to minimize errors in practical application.

Mastering the principles of competitive-historical method, we can update our perspective in the study of Chinese. With the application of competitive-historical method, we can also apply it to vocabulary, grammar, etc., although there will be some difficulties, we still need to constantly test and explore the truth.

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