

THE ADJECTIVAL SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER “ǎn” FROM THE RESPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: Monosyllabic adjectives constitute a pivotal component of modern Chinese adjectival systems and hold significant importance in lexicographical practice. The character “ǎn” in modern Chinese ranks 2373rd in the Frequency Dictionary of Modern Chinese with a usage frequency of 0.0048, indicating its relatively high functional prominence. This study employs the Peking University CCL Corpus to conduct statistical sampling of adjectival usages of “ǎn” through a dual methodology integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis. Applying the theoretical framework of Generative Lexicon Theory, the research proposes a reclassification of the existing two adjectival senses of “ǎn” in the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition) into four refined semantic categories. The findings aim to provide empirically grounded insights for future revisions of authoritative lexicographical resources in Chinese linguistic studies.
Keywords: Modern Chinese; Sense distribution; Corpus; The character “ǎn”

1 INTRODUCTION

From a historical point of view, the study and discussion of Chinese adjectives can be traced back to an earlier period. For example, Ma Jianzhong [1] categorized and studied Chinese adjectives in 1898.1 Since then, adjectives have gradually developed and entered a more diversified stage. Li Jinxi [2] considered that the starting point for the study of modern Chinese adjectives. In his book, he treats adjectives as an independent word class and divides them into subclasses such as traits, quantities, and indicative questions. This categorization system laid the foundation for the later study of adjectives.

Since the late 20th century, the study of adjectives has gradually shown a diversified trend. Scholars began to pay attention to the special usage and syntactic functions of adjectives, such as adjectives as determiners, predicates and gerunds. For example, Zhang Min [3] introduced the theory of cognitive linguistics, with a special focus on putting theoretical claims on empirical basis and the study of some core issues closely related to it.

Generally speaking, the research on adjectives in China has achieved fruitful results in recent decades, ranging from the exploration of basic theories to the multidimensional research on function, semantics and cross-linguistic comparison. This development not only reflects the evolution of linguistic theories, but also demonstrates the scholars' in-depth research attitudes and methods on adjectives as a linguistic phenomenon.

2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

Yuan Yulin [4] conducted a pioneering study on noun definitions in lexicography from the perspective of Generative Lexicon Theory, identifying several systemic issues in current lexicographical definitions and proposing solutions grounded in qualia-based analysis. Their research demonstrated that adopting a "thematic argument + qualia role" definitional schema enhances both the precision and systematicity of lexical entries. This model prioritizes three definitional sub-principles—patterning, uniformity, and identity—thereby facilitating the construction of lexicographic definitions that are more standardized, streamlined, and reader-accessible. Building upon Yuan Yulin's theoretical framework for qualia role classification, this study applies the "thematic argument-qualia role" schema to reanalyze the adjectival senses of the character “ǎn”, aiming to achieve a comprehensive and semantically precise description of its adjectival semantics.

The CCL Corpus, developed by the Peking University Center for Chinese Linguistics (PKU-CCL), constitutes a large-scale Chinese linguistic database encompassing not only written texts (e.g., newspapers, books, academic journals) but also multimodal resources such as spoken language corpora (e.g., Beijing dialect surveys), film/TV scripts, and web-based materials. As one of the most extensive repositories of contemporary Chinese texts, the CCL Corpus prioritizes granular corpus categorization, thereby enhancing the representativeness of sampled data. This study leverages the PKU-CCL Corpus to extract linguistic instances of the character “ǎn”. As of September 2023, the corpus contains 2,773,443 modern Chinese instances of “ǎn”. Following the methodology introduced by Li S.C., a balanced subcorpus specific to “ǎn” was constructed to ensure analytical rigor.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Analysis of the Adjectival Senses of “ǎn” in Contemporary Chinese Dictionary

3.1.1 Adjective: "calm; peaceful"

"ān" is an ideogram that first appeared in Shuowenjiezi. It means that a woman feels peaceful when she is inside her house and is first found in the oracle bone inscriptions. [5] The definition of this item in adopts a word-for-word interpretation, which naturally affects the dictionary users' understanding of the interpreted word and its application.

In the balanced corpus of adjectival usage for the character "ān", this specific semantic sense comprises 2,684 instances, accounting for approximately 53.68% of total occurrences, thereby representing its most frequent usage. Corpus analysis reveals that the subject argument of "ān" predominantly references human entities, emphasizing psychological experiences characterized by mental serenity and satisfaction. The term primarily modifies descriptors related to individuals' mental states, highlighting its quintessential qualities of "tranquility" and "contentment". This pattern substantiates the evaluative function of "ān" in linguistic contexts, particularly in characterizing subjective psychological conditions rather than objective physical states.

In the Chinese-English Dictionary (3rd Edition), the semantic sense of the character "ān" is rendered as "calm", while The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (9th Edition) defines this sense as "not excited, nervous or upset". Both lexicographical interpretations converge on the domain of human mental states, specifically characterizing subjective emotional dispositions manifested in individuals' responses to external stimuli. This comparative analysis demonstrates that the Oxford Dictionary accentuates the evaluative function of this sense through its psychological descriptors. Cross-referencing English lexicographic conventions, it is methodologically recommended to refine the lexical entry as follows: Adjective, serving to characterize an individual's mental state marked by serenity and contentment through affective self-perception.

3.1.2 Adjective: safe; secure

In the balanced corpus of the adjectival sense of "ān", this semantic unit comprises 2316 instances, with a usage frequency of 46.32%. The Modern Chinese Dictionary defines "safe" as "having no accidents, dangers, or risks; stable; safe," yet its circular explanatory framework—combining "safe" and "safety"—exhibits terminological redundancy. As argued by Zhang Zhiyi and Zhang Qingyun, "linguistic interpretation should emerge from comprehensive empirical documentation, where accurate explanations necessitate deep descriptive analysis of linguistic realities". The polysemy of the adjective "ān" arises from its capacity to activate distinct qualia roles across different subject arguments. Variations in qualia-modifying relationships between adjectives and nouns generate semantic multiplicity through contextualized syntactic-semantic interfaces [6].

In this case, "ān" is the cognitive subject's subjective judgment of the current environment, highlighting its evaluative role. When the subjective element of "ān" points to a person or an object, "ān" refers to the external characteristics of the modified object. For example, "the schoolbag is safe and sound in his arms", "ān" means "the schoolbag is not damaged or missing", which expresses the external characteristics of the objective object and emphasizes its formal role. When the subject element of "safe" refers to abstract things (topics, behaviors, etc.), it highlights the characteristics of the modified object as "risk-free and inoffensive". For example, the phrase "it is a safe investment" emphasizes the risk-free nature of the act of "investing". The word "risk" in the Han means "noun, possible danger". It is a kind of subjective judgment on things, it embodies the role of evaluation. Therefore, based on the variation in subject arguments and qualia roles activated by the character "ān", it is methodologically recommended to reclassify its semantic entry into three distinct subsenses:

① Adjective: Denoting favorable environmental conditions free from danger

This subsense accounts for 594 instances (11.88%) in the balanced adjectival corpus of "ān". Cross-referencing the Chinese-English Dictionary, the English equivalent for this subsense is "safe". The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition) defines "safe" as "protected from any danger or harm", which strategically captures the evaluative function (from any danger or harm) inherent to this subsense. Corpus analysis indicates that the subject arguments of "ān" in this context predominantly involve abstract entities such as "circumstances", "situations", and "conditions". Here, "ān" semantically encodes "freedom from danger", denoting a subjective assessment of external environments rather than objective physical states. This configuration highlights its evaluative role in pragmatic contexts where speakers conceptualize environmental security through epistemic modality.

The Modern Chinese Dictionary adopts a circular word-to-word definitional approach for this semantic unit. Specifically, "safe" is defined as: "adjective, denoting favorable environmental conditions free from danger". The phrase "free from danger" inherently encodes a subjective evaluative stance toward perceived situational risks, thereby aligning the dictionary's explanatory framework with the evaluative role of this lexeme. Notably, the Modern Chinese Dictionary employs descriptive paraphrasing for "safe", a strategy that mitigates semantic redundancy and conceptual ambiguity while enhancing users' pragmatic comprehension of the defined term.

② Adjective: Entities remain free from physical impairment, detrimental effects, or material deprivation

This semantic unit accounts for 1,598 instances (31.96%) in the balanced adjectival corpus of "ān". Corpus-driven analysis reveals that when "ān" modifies subject arguments referring to human entities or physical objects, it semantically encodes the absence of damage, detrimental alteration, or material loss. This aligns with the third subsense of "safe" in the Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition), defined as "not harmed, damaged, lost, etc."

③ Adjective: Topics, behaviors, and related practices characterized by risk mitigation and non-provocative engagement

This subsense accounts for 124 occurrences (2.48%) in the balanced adjectival corpus of “ān”. Corpus analysis reveals that when “ān” modifies abstract subject arguments such as discursive topics or social behaviors, it encodes risk attenuation and non-antagonistic intentionality. This aligns with the fifth subsense of “safe” in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition): “not involving much/any risk; not likely to be wrong or to upset someone”, which foregrounds evaluative modality through subjective human judgment.

3.2 A Lexicographic Definitional Critique of the Polysemous Character “ān” in Modern Chinese Dictionaries

3.2.1 *The surroundings are good, no danger*

This item has 594 entries in the adjective balance corpus of the word “ān”, with a frequency of use of 11.88%.

In the Chinese-English Dictionary, the English equivalent of the word “safe” is “ān”. In the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (9th edition), the definition of “safe” is “protected from any danger or harm”, and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (9th edition) captures the evaluative role of “from any danger or harm”. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (9th edition) captures the evaluative role of “from any danger or harm” in its interpretation. Referring to the English dictionary, according to the labeled corpus, we find that the subject element of the word “ān” is usually “situation”, “circumstance”, “form”, which refers to abstraction, which points to an abstract thing.[7] In this case, the character “ān” shows the characteristic of “not being in danger”, which indicates that it is a kind of subjective judgment of people on the external environment, highlighting its evaluative role.

In the Modern Chinese Dictionary, the definition of the term is based on the interpretation of words. The corresponding definition of “ān” in the Modern Chinese Dictionary is as follows: “Good surroundings, no danger”. The meaning of “no danger” is a subjective evaluation of what happens, so the interpretation mode of this item in the Modern Chinese Dictionary also emphasizes the role of evaluation. Moreover, the Modern Chinese Dictionary uses a descriptive interpretation of “safe”. Descriptive interpretation can better avoid semantic repetitions and conflicts and deepen dictionary users’ understanding and application of the interpreted words. According to the principle of generative thesaurus theory of adjective “subject thesis element + object role”, it is suggested to describe this item as “adjective, referring to the surrounding environment is good, there is no danger.”

3.2.2 *No injury, damage or loss to persons or objects*

There are 1,598 entries in the balanced corpus of adjectives with the character “ān”, with a frequency of use of 31.96%. According to the annotated corpus, it is found that when the subject element modified by “ān” is directed to a person or an object, it is usually characterized by “no injury, damage, or absence”. Corresponds to the third definition of “safe” in The Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (9th edition) “not harmed, damaged, lost, etc.”. With reference to the English dictionary, it is suggested that this item should be re-described as: adjective, not harmed, damaged or lost.

3.2.3 *Topics, behaviors, etc. that are risk-free and inoffensive*

There are 124 entries in the adjective balance corpus of the word “ān”, which is 2.48%. According to the annotated corpus, when the subject element modified by “ān” refers to abstract things such as “topic” and ‘behavior’, it usually exhibits the characteristics of “no risk, no offense”.

The fifth definition of the corresponding word “safe” in The Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (9th edition) is “not involving much or any risk; not likely to be wrong or to upset sb”. [8] not involving much or any risk; not likely to be wrong or to upset sb” is a kind of conclusion drawn from a person’s subjective judgment of what he or she is facing, highlighting the role of evaluation. Therefore, with reference to the English Dictionary, it is suggested that the definition be modified to read: “adjective, of a topic, behavior, etc., that is risk-free and inoffensive”.

4 CONCLUSION

To summarize, the steps of describing adjectival items by applying the theory of material structure are: firstly, determine the subject element modified by the adjectival items in the corpus article by article, then classify the subject elements, then analyze the material structure of the adjectival items and the subject elements as well as the association between the two, and finally describe the items by adopting the interpretation mode of “subject element + material role” according to the activated material roles of the adjectives to achieve the purpose of descriptive discourse interpretation. Finally, according to the role of object activated by the adjective, the item is described by the interpretation mode of “subject theorist + object role”, [9] which achieves the purpose of using descriptive discourse to interpret meanings. The theory of object structure can more comprehensively and accurately depict the semantic features of the adjectival denotations of monosyllabic adjectives, which helps to optimize the lexical interpretation and facilitate the understanding of lexical meanings by dictionary users.

Adjectives are one of the important lexical types in the modern Chinese lexical system and have always been the focus of attention in the academic community. However, the research on adjectives focuses on syntactic functions, and a systematic and comprehensive study on the distribution of denotations has not yet been formed. The birth of corpus technology has pushed forward the progress of lexicography, but the updating and supplementation of dictionaries need time and cannot be accomplished overnight. The Modern Chinese Dictionary contains a lot of commonly used polysemous words, and the fineness of the meaning of some other words needs to be improved. In this paper, we take the interpretation of the adjective “ān” as the object of study, and based on the theory of generative thesaurus, and

combining with the 5000 specific corpora extracted from the CCL corpus, we analyze the meaning of the word “ān”, Based on the theory of generative thesaurus and 5000 specific corpora extracted from the CCL corpus, the interpretation of the adjective “ān” in the Modern Chinese Dictionary is analyzed, and corresponding adjustments are proposed for the division and depiction of the items.

The size and quality of the corpus have a direct impact on the results of the study, and the study in this paper has some limitations, such as the relatively small size of the corpus, the lack of rich and comprehensive samples, and the single reference dictionary, etc. Therefore, future research can start from expanding the size of the corpus to include more languages, so as to obtain more accurate and comprehensive results. Therefore, future research can start from expanding the size of the corpus and adding more languages to the lexicon for comparison, so as to obtain more accurate and comprehensive research results.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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