

## A Comparison Between Word Formation in English and Chinese

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly deals with the comparison between word formation in English and Chinese. It compares word formation between the two different languages, focusing on compound words, derivations, abbreviations, loan words and new forms of network languages. Similarities and differences can be found through the comparison between these two languages. The paper comes to a conclusion that similar and different process of word formation existed in the two different writing systems, knowing the similarities and differences of word formation of these two languages will help native language learners understand their own languages better and will be especially meaningful for those English L2 learners and Chinese L2 learners.

### 1. Introduction

Word-formation is also called morphology, which studies formation or construction rules of words. A lot of English words have rules to follow, so master the rules of the word formation can be of great help in learning English vocabulary. Traced back to 1860s, “morphology” as a linguistic term that used in biology. It came into being in the study of the “evolution” of words in the Indo-European and their 400 or 500 basic roots, particular in the hope of solving the “riddle” of the origin of language [1]. In its modern sense, morphology is essentially synchronic, primarily concerned with the forms of words through the use of morpheme construct [2].

The research of Chinese language word formation also has a long history. So far, many books related the words formation of English and Chinese have been written and published. The works from Qing Dynasty’s Ma Shi Wen Tong to today’s works on Chinese morphology prove that the research work on this field is fruitful and productive. The author of *The Morphology of Chinese: A Linguistic and Cognitive Approach* which was published in 2000 thinks that Chinese does indeed have ‘morphology’, and the morphology that it has is of a most intriguing and enlightening sort [3]. The long history and effective research on the word formation between the two languages make the comparison becomes a possible. And knowing the similarities and differences between the two languages can greatly help native learners and especially the second language learners to grasp vocabulary more easily.

### 2. Compounds of English and Chinese

Compound words can be found in both English language and Chinese language.

English compound words refer to words that are made up of two or more free morphemes, such as words are combined by nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives or prepositions. There are three ways to represent the compound words, i.e. write the word in a single word such as bedroom, or use a hyphen to connect the morpheme such as mother-in-law, or write with a space between the elements such as post office.

Likewise, compounding is the most productive process of word formation in Chinese modern language. As Jerry Norman states that by far the greatest numbers of words in the dictionaries are compounds. A compound consists of at least two morphemes neither of which is an affix: *zhuo zi* (table) is not a compound because it is composed of a root morpheme plus a suffix, but *zhuo bu* (tablecloth) is a compound because it is made up of two root morphemes [4].

Usually, the formation of English and Chinese compound words can be classified as the types

beneath:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1) noun + noun >> compound noun<br>tooth + brush >> toothbrush<br>pencil + box >> pencil-box<br>snow + ball >> snowball<br>day + light >> daylight         | 1) noun + noun >> compound noun<br>dao + lu >> dao lu<br>jie + mei >> jie mei<br>fang + yuan >> fang yuan<br>bi + he >> bi he      |
| 2) noun + verb >> compound<br>sun + rise >> sunrise<br>rain+fall >> rainfall   | (2) subject + predicate >> compound<br>di + zhen >> di zhen<br>tou + tong >> tou tong  |
| 3) verb + noun >> noun compound<br>pick + pocket >> pickpocket<br>flash + light >> flashlight<br>turn+ table>>turntable<br>wash + machine>>washing machine | (3) verb + noun >> compound<br>xie +zhi >> xie zhi<br>qian + ming >> qian ming<br>pao + bu >> pao bu<br>tiao + san >> tiao san     |
| 4) verb + adverb >> compound<br>break + down >> breakdown<br>take + over >> takeover<br>warm + up>>warm-up<br>break + in>>break-in                         | 4) verb + adverb >> compound<br>zeng + qiang >> zeng qiang<br>da + dao >> da dao<br>ti + gao >> ti gao<br>jian + shao >> jian shao |
| 5) adjective + noun >> compound<br>black + board >> blackboard<br>blue + print >> blueprint  | (5) modifier + stem >> compound noun<br>hong + qi >> hong qi<br>bai +zhi >> bai zhi  |

### 3. Derivations in English and Chinese

Derivation is also known as affixation, a process of creating new words by adding affixes to roots. In both Chinese and English, many words are formed by adding affixes to roots. Roots are actually content morphemes, carrying with them lexical meanings. Affixes could be either functional or semantic.

#### 3.1. English Affixes

Affixes in English mainly refer to the prefixes and suffixes, the process involving them are called prefixation and suffixation. In English derivational morphemes can occur at either end of the based words whereas regular inflection is always expressed by suffixes. There is no inflectional prefix in English [5].

##### 3.1.1. Prefixes

Prefixes change the meaning of the root but normally not the part of speech. Examples:

fore- (pre-): see>>foresee, tell>> foretell, face>>preface view>>preview  
intra: mural>>intramural, personal>> intrapersonal, provincial>> intraprovincial  
mis-: lead>>mislead, arrange>>misarrange, deed>>misdeed, use>>misuse  
mono-: lingual>>monolingual, cycle>>monocycle, lateral>>monolateral  
multi-: lateral>>multilateral, media>>multimedia, national>>multinational  
non-: science>>non-science, smoker>> non-smoker, alcoholic>>non-alcoholic  
post: graduate>>postgraduate, script>> postscript, war>>postwar  
re-: read>>reread, write>> rewrite, view>>review, access>>reaccess  
semi-: vowel>>semivowel, lunar>>semi-lunar, metal>>semi-metal  
super-:market>>supermarket,power>>superpower,natural>>supernatural  
telephone, scope>>telescope, communication>>telecommunication tele-:phone>>

un-(in-,im-,il-,ir-):able>>unable,important>>unimportant,capable>>incapable,  
consistent>>inconsistent,moral>>immoral,mature>>immature,legal>>illegal, logical>>illogical,  
regular>>irregular, responsible>> irresponsible

### 3.1.2. Suffixes

English suffixes change the part of speech and alter the meaning (usually grammatical meaning) of roots. Examples:

-ation(-tion,-sion,-ion):apply>>application,simplify>>simplification  
-ance,-ence: important>>importance, occur>>occurrence  
-er(-or,-ess,-ist):teach>>teacher,act>>actor(actress),social>>socialist  
-ment:develop>>development,treat>>treatment,employ>>employment  
-ness: careless>>carelessness, ruthless>>ruthlessness

At present, there is a tendency of using combining forms (which are bound roots but function like affixes) to create new words, such as prefixes micro-, macro-, neuro-, or suffixes -gate: Irangate, zipper gate; -speak: Xispeak, Netspeak.

### 3.2. Chinese Affixes

Compared to English, Chinese has few affixes. The scarcity of affixes in Mandarin accounts for one of the earliest observed typological characteristics of the language--that Mandarin is an isolated language. Prefixes and infixes are extremely rare in Mandarin, while suffixes are slightly more numerous [6].

#### 3.2.1. Functional affixes

In Chinese, functional affixes usually refer to nouns the affixes may phonetically help balance words in pronunciation, such as -zi,-men, or grammatically indicate a intimate relationships between the speakers such as lao-, da-, a- , or the superlative degree such as zui-, for example:

a. prefix + root

lao-: lao hu (tiger), lao shu (mouse), lao shi (teacher), lao xiang (hometown fellow)

da- : da jie(older sister), da ge (elder brother), da shen(aunt), da shu (uncle)

ke-: ke ai (lovely), ke kao (reliable), ke xiao (laughable)

zui-: zui hao (at best), zui huai (at worst), zuibang (the best)

b. root + suffix

-zi: fang zi (house), che zi (car), piao zi (money), zuo zi (table)

-men: wo men (we), ni men (you plural form), ta men (they), ren men (people)

#### 3.2.2. Content affixes

Content affixes also exist in Chinese as in English, they change the semantic meaning of words (Some semantic affixes in Chinese change both the meaning and parts of speech, therefore, these affixes in Chinese are called semi-affixes).

ci- (next to/poor): ci yao (less important), ci pin (poor quality product)

ya- (second to): ya jun (silver medal winner), ya re dai (subtropical)

fei- (not): fei fa (illegal), fei jin shu (nonmetal)

fan- (against): fan zhan (anti-war), fan ge ming (counterrevolutionary)

shuang- (double/two): shuang bian (bilateral), shuang fang (both sides)

-yuan (member/person): yan yuan (actor/actress), fu wu yuan (waiter/waitress)

-min (person/folk): nong min (farmer), yu min (fisherman),

-xue (subject): yu yan xue (linguistics), shu xue (mathematics)

#### 3.2.3. Repetition of words

AA-style (words show the intimate relationships to the nouns): ye ye (grandpa), nai nai (grandma), ge ge (elder brother), di di (younger brother), mei mei (younger sister), gou gou (dog)

ABAB-style (informal use most in spoken Chinese): tao lun tao lun (to have a discussion), can guan can guan (to pay a visit), duan lian duan lian (to take exercise)

## 4. Abbreviations in English and Chinese

Abbreviation is a way of word formation in the English language. It is also applicable in Chinese.

### 4.1. English abbreviations

Abbreviations are the combination of initial letters of a noun phrase but they are different mainly in formation and pronunciation. Abbreviations can be grouped according to two orthographic and phonological properties. They can be spelled with either capital or lower-case letters, and they can be pronounced either by naming each individual letter (so called initialisms, as in USA), or by applying regular reading rules (e.g. NATO). In the latter case the abbreviation is called an acronym.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome >> AIDS

National Aeronautics and Space Administration >> NASA

Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries >> OPEC

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization >> UNESCO

Examples of English initialisms:

as soon as possible >> a.s.a.p.

Frequently Asked Questions >> FAQ

International Monetary Fund >> IMF

United States of America >> USA

World Trade Organization >> WTO

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade >> GATT

Apart from words composed of initial letters, abbreviations can also use incorporate non-initial letters: BSc >> Bachelor of Science, Inc >> Incorporated, Ltd. Limited, kHz >> kilohertz.

### 4.2. Chinese Abbreviations

A new word is considered an abbreviated form if a) there is a clear preexisting word or phrase that contains all the constituents of the abbreviation and b) the abbreviation is considered to be derived directly from that longer word or phrase. Word “simplification” or “word-clipping” could be a better one to denote abbreviation in Chinese. Examples like: chao ji shi chang >> chao shi (supermarket), cai se dian shi >> cai dian (colored TVset), huan jing bao hu >> huan bao (environmental protection), Zhong guo jian she yin hang >> jian hang (China Construction Bank), xia men da xue >> xia da (Xiamen University).

## 5. Mutual loans in English and Chinese

The process of borrowing “is one of the most frequent ways of acquiring new words, and speakers of all languages do it” [8]. One of the initial reasons for borrowing is when one language has a semantic “gap” in its lexicon (i.e., when there is no existing word in the language with the same meaning as a loan) and needs to borrow a term to express the necessary idea or concept [8]. Weinreich lists a number of specific reasons for borrowing and emphasizes that borrowing is a result of language contact and thus a result of culture contact [9].

### 5.1. English loans from the Chinese language

#### 5.1.1. phonetic translation

Bao zi, dui lian, jiao zi, kow-tow, ma jiang, feng shui, kung fu, wei qi, oolung, pu tong hua, qi pao, shang hai, yin, yang, yuan.

#### 5.1.2. semantic translation

bean curd, Buddhism, chopsticks, panda, phoenix, gold fish, incense, fireworks, monk, acupuncture, Beijing Opera, Confucius, Confucianism.

### 5.1.3. English has Chinese Characteristics

Opening Up policy, family planning, win-win policy, three representatives, vegetable basket project

## 5.2. Chinese words borrow from English

### 5.2.1. Phonetic translation

Ka fei(coffee),sha fa(sofa),gao'erfu(golf), ba lei(ballet) , bang(pound), sa ke si(saxophone), ba si (bus), ji ta (guitar), bai bai (bye-bye), ke long (clone), luo ji (logic), ni gu ding (Nicotine)

### 5.2.2. "Phonetic + semantic" translation

phonetic translation:

bei lei mao(beret), ba lei wu (ballet), ju le bu (club), you mo (humor), wei ta ming(Vitamin), ai zi bing(AIDS), pi jiu(beer), ka pian(card), jiu ba(bar), tuo kou xiu(talk show), gao'er fu qiu(golf), bin qi ling (iccream), wu tuo bang (Utopia).

semantic translation:

lan qiu (basketball), fei zao ju (soap opera), qing jing xi ju (sitcom), da xiao tiao (the Great Depression), shang lai ti (sonnet), hong shi zi (Red Cross), dian shi (television), shi bao (times), ji guang (laser), jiao xiang yue (symphony), gong hui (trade union), mian bao (bread), zhi shang (IQ), hei ren (black man), mang wen (Braille), ji du tu (Christian)

direct borrow: BBC, DJ, DVD, MP3, WTO, IQ, APEC, UFO, MBA, NBA, PC, CD, VCD, VOA, SOS, SMS, MMS.

## 6. New forms in Network language

With the rapid development of science and technology, more and more frequent intercommunication among people is being conducted each day with the aid of Internet. A language revolution is going on in the virtual world. Besides already popular words like SMS (Short Message Service), MMS (Multi-media Messaging Service) LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) New forms of network English are created especially used in chat-rooms, emails, and short messages. And the slang is gradually become popular since the wide use of internet by people.

### 6.1. English written network language

New abbreviations: ADN -- Any Day Now, FAQ -- Frequently Asked Question

LOL -- Laughing Out Loud, LTNS-- Long Time No See,

Mix numbers with letters (phonetic)

The letter and the number are often interchangeable in this new form of language

B4N-- Bye for Now, 4u—for u, c u l8er --see you later, P911--My parents are in the room. P=Parents, and 911=emergency, in other words either drop the subject, or watch the language.

### 6.2 Chinese Network Language

Pinyin abbreviations: MM(meimei, cutie), XJJ(xiao jie jie, cute older sister);GG(gege, older brother);WAN(wo ai ni, I love you); BC(bai chi, idiot).

Monophonic Arabic numbers: 520(wo ai ni, I love you) ; 555555(wu, wu, wu..., the sound of crying); 7456 (qi si wo la, exasperating) ;9494 (jiu si jiu si, yes)

## 7. Conclusion

After comparing the word formation of English and Chinese, we can find there are some similarities and differences between the two different languages. Both languages have process of compounding, affixation, abbreviation, and borrowing. In English, a morpheme is the minimal meaningful unit, but not free in most case, most of them are word-building elements, so means of

word-formation have a vital role to play. While in Chinese, characters are free minimal units. Each is a root and can combine with other roots to make new words, so majority Chinese words are compound words. Compared to Chinese, English has more affixes, especially prefixes than Chinese and this is due to the history of English and Chinese. English borrowed a lot from Latin and Greek while Chinese is relatively isolated in the past. Both English and Chinese use a lot of abbreviations, they both use short forms to replace whole words or phrases even sentences like in Chinese. As for borrowing, due to the fast development of society and increasing interactive communications between the two countries, both English and Chinese borrow a lot of languages from each other. As for the new forms in internet, this can account for users adopt their own ways of writing forms to cater to their new creativity. On the whole, knowing the similarities and differences between English and Chinese will be of great help for English L2 and Chinese L2 to grasp the strategies of vocabulary learning.

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