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Some Insect Names in Modern Pekinese

When speaking of modern Chinese languages and dialects, phonetic differences are always strongly emphasized. Chinese themselves seem to pay less attention to lexical differences than e.g. to tone variations in dialects. It is, however, clear that lexical differences are very important and that they often concern the basic vocabulary. Yü an Jiahua was among the firsts to characterize briefly lexical differences between main groups of Chinese dialects. In his Outlines of Chinese Dialects (see bibliography at the end of this article) he gives, though occasionally, a short comparison of words for ‘mosquito’ and ‘fly’ in Modern Standard Chinese (hereafter abbreviated as MSC) and in the Xiang dialects of Shuangfeng, Huangqiao and Changsha. It is just this remark of Yü an Jiahua which inclined me to compare some popular insect names in Modern Pekinese (hereafter abbreviated as MP) and in MSC, especially the polysyllabic ones. There are only a few monosyllabic insect names in MSC and in MP and moreover they are identical in both languages like the most popular word cān 蚕 — ‘silkworm’. As I am interested first of all in the peculiarities of MP, I do not discuss here words which are the same in MP and in MSC (not to speak of minor differences in phonetics), such as for instance wén zi 蚊子 — ‘mosquito’, cāng ying 苍蝇 — ‘fly’, zhà mēng 蟑螂 — ‘grasshopper’, tiào zào 跳蚤 — ‘flea’. Examples from other Chinese languages and dialects are given only to show the structural variety of this type of words.

Generally speaking, there are three main structural types of such words: 1) binoms, i.e. words composed of two monosyllabic elements coordinated, determinative or reduplicated; 2) impressives or such which have an impressive element; 3) periphrastic or such which have a periphrastic element. All these types occur both in MP and in MSC as well as in other Chinese dialects, although with different frequency.
I. Binoms

1. Dragonfly

MP mālāng 蜻蜓 or 蜻蜓 or 蜻蜓 MSC qīngtíng 蜻蜓.

The etymology of the MP word is not clear. Popular etymology seems to indicate something like ‘the horse insect’ which does not sound good for a dragonfly. Possibly mālāng (with stressed first syllable and the second in neutral tone) is in MP treated as having a suffix-like -lang, comparable to -lang in MP shīkelang 屎壳郎 — ‘dung-beetle’ and dāolāng 唆郎 — ‘praying-mantis’.

A kind of dragonfly is in MP called diàomālāng 吊蚂 蜓 i.e. ‘a hanging down dragonfly’ (because when resting it remains with its head on a branch as if suspended, it is said). This is a good example of a MP insect name with a periphrastic element as determinative part. Another MP name for dragonfly is also periphrastic (see below III.9).

It is interesting to note that words for dragonfly differ from dialect to dialect so that MP is not an exception. Frequent are various impressives: a) simple, like tintin 蜻 in the dialect of Wuhan, b) used as determinative, like lālikō noted by Nakajima Motoki in the Huitong dialect of the Xiang group (the word is obviously related to MP lālāgū — ‘cricket’, see below II.6), or c) prefixed like yangmāni 洋螻蟻 given by Yuan Jiahua as dragonfly in the Shuangfeng dialect (apparently related to yanmiemie 蚊 喻 in the dialect of Changsha). Among various names for dragonfly there are also names of obscure etymology like Xuzhou dialect tç'iy ser 青丝儿 (with ser used probably for 蜻). A kind of dragonfly having black and yellow spots is called in Xuzhou lshup'i 老虎皮 — lit. ‘tiger-skin’. This is a good example of purely periphrastic name.

2. Locust

MP màzhá 螽 螽 or 螽 螽 or 螽 螽 or 螽 螽 MSC huángchóng 蝗虫.

Like mālāng is of obscure etymology. A kind of small locust is in MP called màzhadüer 螽 螽 or màzhā'är 螽 螽. The first is etymologically not clear, the second may be periphrastic with the meaning of ‘the locust’s saddle’ i.e. so small as a saddle for a normal-size locust. Moreover, a kind of bird (I couldn’t identify it) eating locust is called màzháying 螽 螽 or 螽 螽 i.e. ‘locust-hawk’ or ‘locust-eagle’ which is a kind of periphrastic name.

Words for locust differ also in Chinese dialects. They are mostly periphrastic, if I dare to say so. Xiang dialect of Shuangfeng has for instance xūikau 蛀 蛀 (with gū 蚱 instead of gū 蚱) — lit. ‘insect jumping in the rice’. The dialect of Yongding (Xiaoyang) of the Min group has ts'oun shǔ 稻 蝗 — lit. ‘grass locust’. N.B. the difference between locust and grasshopper is not quite clear in China: the authors of A word-list for the survey of Chinese dialects give the names for locust and for grass-
hopper under one item; and meng \( \frac{\text{変}}{\text{変}} \) means in Old Chinese 'small locust or grasshopper'. Nakajima Motoki notes putong \( \frac{\text{ парт}}{\text{ парт}} \) as the Huitong dialect name for locust. This is of rather obscure etymology, but may be periphrastic ('a kind — pu — of the worm toy'). Xuzhou dialect mazi \( \frac{\text{沒}}{\text{沒}} \) is a structure with suffix-like MP wènzǐ — 'mosquito' and many others.

3. Earthworm

I am aware of the fact that earthworm is not an insect at all, nevertheless I am discussing here the words for earthworm, because it is in Far East notoriously classed among insects. Nakajima Motoki, for instance, has not only earthworm among insects, but snail, snake, lizard, scorpion and others, too (cf. pp. 146–149), whereas bat is classed by him as fowl (p. 142) and crocodile, whale and crabs appear among fish.

MP qūshān \( \frac{\text{處}}{\text{處}} \) or \( \frac{\text{區}}{\text{區}} \), MSC qūyīn \( \frac{\text{巨}}{\text{巨}} \).

MP qūshān is etymologically a binom composed of two coordinated parts 'earthworm and earthworm', just like MSC qūyīn, but is seems that popular etymology tend to treat the first part of the MP binom as determinant with the meaning of 'bending, wriggling'.

Etymologically the same word qūshān occurs in many other Chinese dialects from Wuhan, where it is pronounced tč'you san to Xining where it is known with the pronunciation tč'y şā. In this last dialect we have also mítč'yşā tč' şč — lit. 'mud earthworm', an enlarged periphrastic form. The dialects of Henan have another word which is not clear. It sounds in Luoyang tč'ytc'yăn tč'y and in Jiyuan tč'y?tč'yăn tč'y. The Huitong dialect of the Xiang group has an interesting periphrastic form: tšunyton tšč — lit. earth fish worm'.

b) Reduplicated

4. Spider

MP zhūzhu \( \frac{\text{朱}}{\text{朱}} \), MSC zhūzhú \( \frac{\text{朱}}{\text{朱}} \).

The MP form is rather reduplicated than purely impressive, although the difference is not purely. The same word is used with different pronunciation in various dialects like these of Jiyuan, Luoyang, Xining, but it occurs also in the Min languages (e.g. in the dialect of Pinyang in Fujian). Reduplicated nonimpressive binoms are rather seldom among insect names.

Some dialects have words of different etymology e.g. the Huitong dialect pōsi \( \frac{\text{辺}}{\text{辺}} \) Xuzhou dialect luijusi \( \frac{\text{粒}}{\text{粒}} \) — lit. 'net-spider'.

II. Impressives

5. Cricket

MP qūqur \( \frac{\text{播}}{\text{播}} \), MSC xishuài \( \frac{\text{熄}}{\text{熄}} \)
The same word appears in the dialect of Wuhan, similar forms are known from other dialects like Xuzhou ʨ’erç’er and in the Pingyang dialect from the Min group we have ɛwɛcyɔŋ with a very peculiar type of suffix which is equivalent of MSC and MP ɛr (this suffix makes the vowel of the second syllable long and finished with -ŋ).

Other words for cricket belong to the periphrastic type: 1) Xiang dialect of Shuangfeng has ʦaŋtikou 堆ighet — lit. ‘stovechicken’; 2) Xiang dialect of Huitong has ʨtisatsi 卩己三十 — lit. ‘chicken hood’ or ʨtisatsi 卩己三十 which is probably better i.e. lit ‘(the one who is) pecked by chicken’. The Yongding (Xiayang) dialect of the Min group has ts’autsi?tsi 卐鶻子 which has ʦi — ‘centipede’ instead of ʨi ‘to chirp’ — lit. ‘(the one who is) chirping in the grass’. Xuzhou dialect common name for cricket ivotur 當蟹 is rather obscure whereas a kind of a big cricket is in this dialect called taŋtikou 大飛蟹 — lit. ‘great flying bird’ which is a good example of a periphrastic name.

6. Mole-cricket

MP ɿlələŋ or ɿlələŋ 堆地甲 or 堆裡甲 MSC lówəŋ 堆蟹.

It is obviously the same word as the Huitong dialect laliko — ‘dragonfly’ noted by Nakajima and it is an impressive determining ɡə — ‘mole-cricket’.

Other dialects have interesting periphrastic names like Wuhan t’oukoutsi 卐土狗子 — lit. ‘earth dog’ or Yongding (Xiayang): t’iloufi地老虎 — lit. ‘earth tiger’.

7. Cicada

MP jinião 卯虫 or 餃虫 or 餃虫 MSC chán 蟑 or zhiliào 知了 or zhiliào知了.

All these forms are doubtless different notations of the same word with typical Pekinese hesitation between n and l (MSC ningkə ｎ insecurity — ‘rather’ is in MP pronounced ləŋkə). Possibly all these forms are originally impressive subsequently etymologized as: jyi ‘to chirp’ and nião ȵò — ‘bird’. Thus the periphrastic meaning is: ‘chirping bird’ or ‘humming bird’. It must however be said that Wuhan tsua 稻 or isi i is certainly related to MP.

A kind of small cicada is in Xuzhou called fuliang 伏蟈, because it makes a noise similar to the sound fuliang as it is explained. The same kind is also called tɕišilou 金蜆 — lit. ‘golden cicada’.

8. Praying mantis

MP dòolang ㄌㄅMSC tängläng 威娜.

The MP form is not clear. It may be dissimilated tängläng which is quasi-impressive of the tieyun type. The Pekinese form has a characteristic hesitation between aspirated and unaspirated (as in húdu ㄏㄨㄛˊ instead of húu). Pekinese dòolang may also be understood as something like ‘knife mantis’.

Other words for praying mantis are also difficult to interpret like these noted by Nakajima (malangk’ang and lautongkuang).
III. Periphrastic

9. Dragonfly
MP lāolìlì 兰缕俚 MSC qīngqīng 喷螺
MP word means lit. ‘(old) colored glaze’ with prefixed lāo.

10. Dung-beetle
MP shìkēlāng 岁壳郎 MSC qiāngláng 措螂
The MP word has a periphrastic part shì — ‘dung’ determining kēlāng — ‘beetle’.

It is remarkable that words of this type are not frequent in MP. They are much less frequent than in other Chinese dialects. Wuhan dialect has for instance t'ēis's'oy 推屎讴 — lit. ‘pushing dung insect’ which is a very good periphrastic name (with a rather seldom V–O determining N). MP has a very restraint number of periphrastic insect names and — as far as I know — it has also only a small number of such animal names (e.g. yēmaohu 夜猫虎 — lit. ‘night cat-tiger’ instead of biānfū 蝠蝠—‘bat’ or yēmaozī 夜猫子 — lit. ‘night cat’ instead of māotōuyīng 猫头鹰—‘owl’).

Selected bibliography

3. He Wei, Jiuyuan fangyan jīlù 九原记略. Fangyan 1981, 1, pp. 5–26