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Taboo and the development of periphrasis in Chinese

O. Taboo is a well known linguistic phenomenon which was thoroughly examined by many linguists. In its classical form taboo causes the disappearance of the tabooed word or expression and the appearance of its substitute. The main types of substitutes are also well known: they are either a deformed tabooed word, or its simple substitute, or a periphrastic expression or even a metaphor. The causes of linguistic taboo were also discussed by various authors. Therefore there is no need to repeat all this in this short report.

0.1. It must however be said at the very beginning that in China — as usual — things are more complicated than elsewhere. As a consequence of the specific character of the Chinese writing, which offers possibilities unknown to other systems, we have to do with two kinds of linguistic taboo: a purely linguistic and a writing taboo, both being strictly connected.

The writing taboo consists mainly in a graphic alternation of the tabooed character. In most cases we have to do with an omission of one stroke (mostly the last one) in writing and printing. Such a character can be read in mind, but should not be pronounced. Other kind of writing taboo consists in substituting another character instead of the tabooed one.

0.2. To the known and described causes of linguistic taboo sinologist must add one more, which may be called “administrative” and which — as it seems — is unknown to other cultural areas. By administrative cause I mean that the authorities declared a word as taboo. According to an old custom the personal name of the emperor (and in some cases of the empress too) was officially declared as taboo. That means that as long as the emperor ruled the word or words composing his personal name and the character or characters used to write it were forbidden. The pronunciation of these words and the writing of these characters

were taboo. And so it was till the end of the Chinese Empire in 1911.

The most famous example is the case of the personal name of the emperor Kangxi (1662–1723) which was *Xuanye* [1]* or something like the “Dark Firelight”. The emperor ruled 61 years and this was a period of a magnificent development of Chinese philology. Thousands of books were published then.

The second character of the emperor’s personal name is relatively rare and it appears mostly just in personal names. The fact that it was tabooed did not induce any serious perturbances. The character was not used in personal names during the Kangxi era.

The first character of the emperor’s personal name is much more frequent. It appears often in taoist and buddhist texts. It was therefore replaced by *yuan* [2] meaning “first, principal...” In this case *yuan* is to be treated as deformed *xuan* [3]. In writing however there was one more possibility of tabooing it: it could be written [4] i.e. without its last stroke. Let it be said that the character *yuan* was taboo during the reign of the founder of the Ming dynasty and it was than often printed [5], also without its last stroke.

1. In Chinese we have thus from the one hand a very important difference between linguistic taboo and writing taboo, and from the other hand an also important difference between administrative and religious taboo. By religious taboo I mean other kinds of taboo caused by religion, superstitions and all kind of beliefs.

This last difference is very important, because both kinds of taboo exerted different influences on the language. Administrative taboo never lasted for a long time (with the death of the emperor it disappeared). All kinds of religious taboos lasted normally for a very long periods. Thus — generally speaking — the linguistic effects of an administrative taboo were in most cases transient while these of a religious taboo were normally persistent.

There are of course some exceptions from this rule. The empress Lu ruled eight years only (187–179 B.C.) and that meant that only during these eight years her personal name *Zhi* [6] — “pheasant” was tabooed. Nevertheless the periphrastic expression created to replace it — *yeji* [7] — “wild chicken” remained in most Chinese languages Northern as well as Southern. Let us give only two examples: *ietsi* appears in the Huitong dialect of the Xiang group: *iakei* is used in the Yongding dialect of the Southern Min group. This last dialect is very interesting in this respect, because it has two others words for “pheasant”. The one is *sankei* [8] or “mountain chicken”, also a periphrasis caused probably by taboo, but unknown to other Chinese speeches. The second is *ts’ikei* [9] or “pheasant chicken” which

* Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) and Pekinese pronunciation is given in pinyin without tones. Dialectal forms appear in a slightly modified IPA, again without tones. The modifications imposed by the needs of typographic simplification are: nasal *n* is written *ng*; palatalisation of vowels is indicated by *i* following the consonant; retroflex consonants are written with circumflex; the vowel *i* (as in MSC *zhi*) is marked by double *i* (*ii*).

is a polysyllabized form of the ancient monosyllable. This is also an exception as far as I could to verify it.

In this particular case periphrastic forms supplanted archaic monosyllabic forms in most Chinese languages. There is evidently no explication of this phenomenon.

2. As a matter of fact we do know far more words and expressions which appeared as the result of religious taboo than those caused by the administrative one.

Among the eldest expressions which may be classified as results of religious taboo there is the expression *tianji* [10] — “field chicken” used with the meaning of “frog”. This periphrastic expression has replaced old monosyllabic words *wa* [11] and *guo* [12] — “frog”. Let us remember that since remote antiquity frog was in China the symbol of the moon and this it was linked with all feminine forces. It was quite natural to avoid the pronounciation of its name for everyone who did not want to attract unwillingly the dark *yin* forces.

3. As we may see from the last two examples — “wild chicken” and “field chicken” — the Chinese taboo (independently from its causes) induced often the appearance of periphrastic expressions. This is certainly an important characteristic feature of the Chinese language and it played a very important role in the development of Chinese lexic.

4. Archaic Chinese lexic was monosyllabic. Units smaller than a syllable had the function of word-formative elements; units bigger than a syllable were syntactic structures. A handful of exceptions is to be treated as marginal from the point of view of general characteristics of the language.

As a consequence of simplification of its phonetic structure Archaic Chinese entered on the way to polysyllabicity. With the simplification of phonetic structure the old system of creating new words by means of consonantal and/or vocal (probably also suprasegmental) alternations within a single syllable was gradually disappearing. The number of homophones relatively very high already in Archaic Chinese, now increased seriously. It is well known that beyond certain limits any further increase of homophony is dangerous for the communicative function of the language.

The only way to prevent the increasing homophony and to provide new means of creating new words was to replace archaic monosyllabic words by polysyllables which at the very beginning were simple syntactic structures. Coordination of two synonymous words was among the simplest ways out. Instead of earlier *peng* and *you* — both meaning “friend” — a coordination *pengyou* [13] could better function with the same meaning, because it did not cause such misunderstandings as the monosyllables *peng* and *you* used separately. J. Chmielewski described this kind of changes in his *The Typological Evolution of the Chinese Language*, published more than forty years ago. Therefore there is no need to repeat here the details of his theory. Let us only remark that J. Chmielewski is interested

chiefly in processes in which archaic words are preserved as elements of syntactic structures e.g. *zhidao* — “to know the way” (a verb-object syntagma) > “to know” (bimorphemic word of the verb-object structure). The author does not discuss cases, in which an archaic monosyllabic word disappears entirely and is replaced by a polysyllabic structure the elements of which are joined together according to the rules of syntax. These are cases which are the object of our special interest.

5. Let us now return to the results of taboo. The periphrastic structures were mostly bisyllabic and very often they had a determinative structure as it is in all cases quoted above. It is quite evident however that structures longer than bisyllable occurred too, although they were less frequent; it is clear enough that other types of syntactic structures were also used in periphrasis.

5.1. A good example of a longer periphrastic structure of taboo origin is the word *maotouying* [14] — “cat-head-hawk” > “owl” which replaced the Archaic *xio*g [15]** in many Modern Chinese languages. In some dialects however we have another periphrasis which are much later as for instance *yemaozi* [16] — “night cat”. In the above mentioned Yongding dialect of South Min group an owl is called *t’aimukeuteu* [17] — “great-eyes dog-head”. These are of course not all the complications linked with the words for an owl in Modern Chinese languages and dialects. There are for instance words of onomatopoeic origin (e.g. the Xining dialect word *hehii* written by Zhang Chengcai [18] (which gives no sense) and words in which the onomatopoeic element is combined with other e.g. the Luoyang dialect *kukumiauii* [19]. The exhaustive discussion of all these words exceeds the frame of this work. The mentioned Huitong dialect has a not very clear word for “owl”: *maukuniau* [21] or something like “cat old bird” (perhaps “cat-shape old bird”). I think that this word is not clear because of its second element. If the identification of Motoki Nakajima is right *kuniau* could be understood as something parallel to the structures with prefixed *lau* — “old”, but in the Huitong dialect there are no other words with prefixed *ku*. On the contrary, there are many words with prefixed *lau* (e.g. *laufu* [22] — “tiger”, *lausiy* [23] — “mouse” etc.).

5.2. This last example provoke the following remark. It is well known that the Chinese writing is a quite good tool to note all what has a long literary tradition. On the contrary it is a very bad tool to note all this what was preserved only in oral tradition. To note something with Chinese characters means always to etymologize (even if a Chinese tries only to render phonetically a borrowed word). Chinese linguists (and Japanese too) trying to note modern dialectal forms with Chinese characters are at the same time imposing an etymology of the noted linguistic

** This Archaic Chinese word and its cognates like *kiog* [84] — “an owl-like bird” are cognate to Tibetan, Burmese, Kachin, Mikir and Lisu words for “owl” and this testifies its antiquity. It is thus clear that monosyllabic words replaced by periphrastic structures belong to older phases of the language. The same may be said of other words discussed in this article, but the problem of cognate words must be excluded from this remarks.

unit and this may simply be wrong and sometimes really is. For there are lots of things which cannot be written down with the existing Chinese characters and lots of things which may be wrongly identified.

Let us give here some examples. Motoki Nakajima notes that in the Huitong dialect crow is called *lau ua* [25] (p. 141) while Huang Xuezhen, the author of "A Glossary of the Yongding Dialect" has no name for this bird at all. This is also very typic for the present state of dialect research in China, but we do not want to discuss here this question.

He Wei, in his "A Sketch of the Jiyuan dialect" has the same word *lau ua* [20]. The same author who wrote "A Sketch of the Luoyang dialect" noted the word *hii lo ua* [31] as dialect word for a crow. Hou Jingyi in his "A Sketch of the Changzhi Dialect" says that in this dialect crow is *ha lo ua* and writes it [32] adding that [33] is a contracted sound. This last remark makes all it clear. It seems quite normal that *wuya* may be contracted into *ua*. Thus *ha lo ua* in the dialect of Changzhi in Shanxi is something like "black old crow" or simpler "black crow", because *lo* (MSC *lao*) is evidently a prefix Changhi, Jiyuan and Luoyang are in the same area and the words for crow in these dialects are obviously of common origin. The Louyang dialect *hii lo ua* is doubtless etymologically the same as the word current in the dialect of Changzhi. Jiyuan (a place less than 50 km from Luoyang) dialect *lau ua* is certainly the same word as this noted by Motoki Nakajima.

As we see two linguists used the character [34] to note the last syllable of the word. No one of them was alarmed by the fact that *wa* [35] used for this notation is an onomatopoeic word and that in Chinese no onomatopoeic word may be determined. No one thought that the obviously prefixal *lao* cannot stay before the onomatopoeic *wa* [36]. This shows clearly how misleading maybe such a notation.

Hou Jingyi's notation of the syllable *ua* with two Chinese characters is in a sense much better, but in reality it stresses only the fact that there is no Chinese character for the contracted form of *wuya* > *ua* — "crow".

Let us finally say that one more attitude is to observe in the above discussed situation. Wang Taiqing in his "A Sketch of the Tongling Dialect" (South of the Yangzi in Anhui) notes that a crow is called *lau ua tsii* [37] (p. 114). To write the syllable *ua* he uses the character meaning "to dig" underlining it by a sinuous line indicating thus that it is only a phonetic notation with no relation to the meaning of the character. This is certainly the best solution in the case one does not recognize in *ua* a contracted form.

All the above discussed words are various enlargements of the old monosyllabic word for a crow. They are not strictly speaking periphrastic structures which are the main object of these remarks. They show however clearly various tendencies in the development of the lexic.

To end this complicate corvine question let us add that there are many other possibilities which were here not taken into consideration. In the dialect of Xining

for instance there are two words for a crow: *kua lo pa* [38] and *kua lo ua* [39] (as written by Zhang Chengcai). In both we have the first syllable *kua* which is another old word for a crow (noted already in Erya) and preserved e.g. in Modern Cantonese *lo kut* [40]. The first word is probably an apositive structure with the meaning “this old boss of a crow”. The second seems a coordination of *kua* — “crow” and *lo ua* — “crow” with the contracted form of *wuya*. On the other limit of Chinese linguistic area the Pingyang dialect (from the Wu group) has *u loc o* [41] which is quite the same.

Huang Xuezhèn, the author of “A Glossary of the Yongding Dialect” gives the following two words for a crow: *pa k'ang tieu* [42] *vi kang sien* [43] and *lou a tsii* [44]. The first two are obviously periphrastic structures although they are not clear (for me at least). The last one preserves the old word *ya* — “crow” preceded by a prefix and followed by a suffix.

As we can see a thorough analysis of the word for crow may be a subject of a separate study.

So far as this, what cannot be written is concerned. A good example of an apparently wrong identification of character offers Motoki Nakajima, who a Huitong dialect word for “bat” — *ieng lau siy* writes [45] (p. 142). As *lau siy* is doubtless “rate” or “mouse” the first syllable must be a determination of it. Is it not strange to suppose that a “bat” is called “salt mouse”? A comparison of this Huitong word with a Wuhan dialect word for a “bat” throws some light on the matter. In Wuhan a “bat” is called *ien siy nau* [45] or is composed of *siy nau* — “rat, mouse” (a word with a suffix *nau* instead of Huitong prefixed *lau siy*) and its determination *ien* — “eaves”. Thus it means litt. “eaves mouse” and that is a very good periphrasis for a “bat”. It is quite clear that Motoki Nakajima wrongly used the character meaning “salt” instead of this meaning “eaves”.

6. Words like “frog”, “bat” or “owl” may easily be subject to taboo and therefore they were substituted by periphrastic expressions. This seems quite natural. The importance of such periphrastic structures for the development of Chinese lexic lies in the fact that they created models for other similar expressions which had nothing common with taboo, but were useful for supplanting old monosyllables by polysyllabic structures.

Among the oldest there is *zhuomuniao* [47] — litt. “pecking wood bird” > “woodpecker”, a new periphrastic expression which replaced the old monosyllable *lie* [48] — “woodpecker”. This last one is not reconstructed by B. Karlgren, but it appears in Erya with the explanation: *lie zhuo mu* [49] — “lie is chopping the wood”. This shows that in the later periphrastic expression only *zhuo* [50] — “to peck” was substituted to older *zhuo* [51] — “to chop, to hack” making the structure more expressive.

6.1. Periphrastic expressions used to avoid tabooed words were a magnificent device to create new words as well as to create expressions which could replace old monosyllables. I do not intend to present here a detailed report on the deve-

lopment of periphrastic structures in Chinese. In order to show how fruitfull was this method of word-formation it will be enough to look into some chosen fields of Modern Chinese lexic and in particular into the lexic of some Modern Chinese languages and dialects.

From all what was said above it is quite clear that the chosen fields of lexic should be restricted to animal and plant names. As far as I could observe just animal names and a certain amount of plant names have very often periphrastic structure. Generally speaking periphrastic expressions are less frequent in MSC. This type of expression is more frequent in other Chinese languages and dialects. There are of course languages and dialects with greater predilection to periphrastic expressions. The Modern Pekinese for instance has more such expressions than the MSC.

6.2. In modern Chinese languages and dialects periphrastic expressions function also as euphemisms, and sometimes as vulgarisms too. This is however a quite separate problem which will not be discussed here. Periphrastic expressions used as euphemisms or vulgarisms do not eliminate the fundamental lexic units used to denote emotionally neutral meaning. Modern Pekinese *maofang* [52] — litt. “grass-thatched house” is an euphemism for *cesuo* [53] — “WC”, but it does not replace this last in all contexts. The same may be said of Modern Pekinese *mao(r)niao* [54] — litt. “urine of a cat” used as vulgar expression denoting bad wine. Let also point out that in such cases the limits between periphrasis and metaphor are obviously not clear cut. This is one more reason to eliminate this kind of expressions from our present remarks.

6.3. Among dialects with relatively much periphrastic animal names Wuhan dialect has apparently a rather special position. To the few examples already quoted above let us add some more:

a) yellow weasel — *huangyou* [55] is in Wuhan called *huangsiy nangtsii* [56] — litt. “yellow rat (like) wolf” or perhaps better “squirrel (like) wolf”.

b) soft-shelled turtle *bic* [57] is in Wuhan called *tsio y* [58] — litt. “legged fish”.

c) cocroach *zhanglang* [59] is in Wuhan called *ts'au ma tsii* [60] — litt. “kitchen horse”.

d) mole-cricket *lougu* [61] is in Wuhan called *t'ou kou zii* [62] — litt. “earthen dog”.

e) dung-beetle *qianglang* [63] is in Wuhan called *t'ei shi ts'ong* [64] litt. “pushing dung worm (or insect)”.

f) centipede *wugong* [65] is in Wuhan called *to tsio ts'ong* [66] litt. “many legs worm”.

g) slug *kuoyu* [67] is in Wuhan called *pi t'ien ts'ong* [68] litt. “snivel worm”.

h) stinkbug *chunqiang* [69] is in Wuhan called *ta p'i ts'ong* [70] litt. “air infecting worm”.

Such enumeration could easily be continued, but it is certainly better to give here some examples of Wuhan plant names:

a) green bristlegrass *you* [71] is in Wuhan called *ku uei pa* or *ku uei pa ts'au* [72] litt. "dog's tail (grass)".

b) Boston ivy *pashanhu* [73] (a periphrastic expression "climbing mountain tiger") is in Wuhan called *pa tsiang hu* [74] litt. "climbing wall tiger".

c) rutabaga *datoucai* [75] (a periphrasis "great head vegetable") is in Wuhan called *kii ta ts'ai* [76] — litt. "knot vegetable".

Especially inventive in this respect is the dialect of Yongding. Some periphrastic expressions occurring in it seem very ingenious:

a) mole-cricket is in Yongding called *t'i lou fi* [77] litt. "earthen tiger".

b) a kind of venomous serpent is in Yongding called *vii hou kon* [78] litt. "stem of taro or lotus".

c) another serpent is called *sang pi tou* [79] litt. "to fall after three steps", because it is known that having been bitten by it one dies after having made three steps only.

d) one more venomous serpent is called *fa long kong* [80] which is not very clear, but seems to have the meaning of some kind of a flower jar.

7. Word-formation by means of periphrasis, primitively linked with linguistic taboo, became more current in the epoch when new syllabic morphology replaced the old intrasyllabic word-formation. Periphrasis became gradually a very important mean of creating new words. No wonder thus that today most neologisms are periphrastic structures. The long tradition of periphrasis in Chinese makes that periphrastic structures supplant phonetic borrowings in quite all Chinese languages. It may even be said that phonetic borrowings are in most cases transitory forms, which sooner or later will be supplanted by periphrastic forms. Chinese languages as a whole do not tolerate phonetic borrowings and this is certainly one of the most important persistent features of these languages. In this respect no Chinese language is comparable with European languages, which — as we know — are superabundant in all kinds of phonetic borrowings. Three centuries of Manchu domination and cohabitation in Peking left only a very restricted number of phonetic borrowings from Manchu in Modern Pekinese. As far as I can judge it the total number of Manchu phonetic borrowings in Pekinese is to be estimated between 30 and 40.

There are of course some differences in this respect between various Chinese languages. The language spoken in Hong Kong is certainly quite exceptional, because of the relatively great number of accepted phonetic borrowings which are not supplanted by periphrastic expressions. It is quite obvious that Chinese language spoken in Singapore has also more phonetic borrowings than Modern Standard Chinese. An augmented number of phonetic borrowings is also to be observed on Taiwan. This is however another problem which cannot be discussed here.

To close these remarks let us return once more to the problem of periphrasis. It is very interesting to observe that new words for new notions are sometimes build from different elements in various places. As a linguistic phenomenon it is quite trivial and even in this short report we have given some examples. Nowadays however such divergences may constitute an important factor of differentiating languages. A good example is the word for video-recorder which is in MSC *luxian-gji* [81] “registrating images machine” and *luyinji* [83] “registrating and reflecting machine” in Taiwan.

Warsaw, April 1993.

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List of Chinese characters

[1] 玄 火 华	[31] 黑 老 哇	[61] 螻 蛄
[2] 元	[32] 黑 老 烏 鴉	[62] 土 狗 子
[3] 玄	[33] 烏 鴉	[63] 螻 蛄 郎
[4] 玄	[34] 哇	[64] 推 屎 虫
[5] 元	[35] 哇	[65] 蜈 蚣
[6] 雉	[36] 哇	[66] 多 脚 虫
[7] 野 鸡	[37] 老 挖 子	[67] 蝮 蛇
[8] 山 鸡	[38] 鷓 鴒 板	[68] 鼻 洪 虫
[9] 雉 鸡	[39] 鷓 鴒 哇	[69] 椿 象
[10] 田 鸡	[40] 老 鷓	[70] 打 屁 虫

- [11] 蛙
[12] 蝮
[13] 朋友
[14] 猫头鹰
[15] 鸺
[16] 夜猫子
[17] 大目狗头
[18] 恨吼
[19] 哇哇喵儿
[20] 老哇
[21] 猫友鸟
[22] 老虎
[23] 老鼠心
[24]
[25] 老哇
[26] 老哇
[27]
[28]
[29]
[30]

- [41] 乌老鸦
[42] 霸坑鸟
[43] 乌监仙
[44] 老鸦子
[45] 盐老鼠
[46] 檐鼠佬
[47] 啄木鸟
[48] 鸺
[49] 鸺盐斤木
[50] 啄
[51] 鸺
[52] 茅房
[53] 厕所
[54] 猫(儿)鼠
[55] 黄鼠虫
[56] 黄鼠狼子
[57] 黄鼠
[58] 脚鱼
[59] 蟑虫郎
[60] 灶马子

- [71] 茅
[72] 狗尾巴(草)
[73] 爬山虎
[74] 爬墙虎
[75] 大头菜
[76] 吃啥菜
[77] 地老虎
[78] 茅荷干
[79] 三步倒
[80] 花郎缸
[81] 录像机
[82] 录影机
[83] 录映机
[84] 桌