To What Extent is “Shang, Above” in Chinese Conceptualized?

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Abstract

Homo sapiens have the ability to conceptualize and the ability to express themselves with what they have conceptualized. These two abilities interact with each other. To what extent can human beings combine these two abilities? In order to answer this question, we studied the historical conception of the linguistic sign “shang, above” in archaic Chinese (11th - 3rd centuries BC). We chose “shang” because it is used to express time as well as space in the Chinese language. The other aim of our paper is then to examine how ancient Chinese people conceptualized time in terms of space.

Key words: prototype, analogy, Conceptual Derivation Domains

Introduction

Human beings have the ability to conceptualize and the ability to express themselves by words or writing. These two abilities are very closely linked. To what extent can human beings conceptualize and express themselves with what they have conceptualized? For answering this question, we examined the linguistic sign “shang, above” in Chinese. The main reason for choosing “shang” is as follows:

In recent years, research has been done on Mandarin and English speakers’ conceptions of time (see Boroditsky 2001). It is observed that the formers conceptualize time in a vertical axe while the latters do so in a horizontal one. Besides, Chinese people’s conception of time is related to their conception of space. Nevertheless, it is not explained how Chinese people conceptualize time in a vertical axe nor why their conceptions of time and space are related. In order to provide an explanation to these two phenomenon, we underwent a diachronic analysis (historical conception) of the linguistic sign “shang, above” in Chinese, which is one of the principal constituents of Chinese temporal expressions.

Origin and Evolution of “shang”

In Jiaguwen1, the linguistic sign “shang, above” is a symbol indicating a vertically higher position of an object in relation with another. It is represented graphically as “�示”. This graphic is formed with an arc line or a horizontal line as the datum line and a short line above it to indicate the higher position. The symbol thus formed is purely indicative and it maps exactly onto what the Chinese people perceived in the physical world more than three thousand years ago.

As the centuries pass, “shang” evolves semantically and syntactically.

We can find examples of different usages of “shang” in the Shijing (Book of Odes)3:
1. Yan yan yu fei shang xia yin (poem no. 28) The swallows go flying about; From below, from above, comes their twittering.
2. Liang fu shang xiang (no. 78) The two insides are two finest possible animals.
3(a). He shang hu ao xiang (no. 79) So do they roam about the He (river).
(b). He shang hu xiao yao So do they saunter about by the He (river).

4. Wan qiu zhi shang xi (no. 136) There on the top of Wanqiu!
5. You huang shang di, … (no. 192) There is the great God, …
6. Ming ming shang tian, …. (no. 207) O bright and high Heaven, …
7. Shang tian tong yun, … (no. 210) The heavens over head are one arch of clouds, …
8. Xiao yu nood shi yu song shang. [They are like] the mistletoe and the dodder growing over the pine.
9. Wen wang zai shang (no. 235) King Wen is on high.
10. Shang xia ju nü (no. 258) To the [Powers] above and below I have presented my offerings and then buried them.
11. Shao ting shang xia. (no. 287) In his room, [I will look for him] to go up and come down in the court.
12. Wu yue gao gao zai shang. (no. 288) Let me not say that It is high aloft above me.

In the above examples, we can see that “shang” is used semantically and syntactically in the following ways:

1 Inscriptions on tortoise shells and ox bones (16th -11th centuries BC).
2 Duan Zhenmei (1999 p. 29).
3 Shijing (Book of Odes) is the earliest Chinese literary text. It is an anthology of songs, poems, and hymns. It consists of 311 poems (6 without text) dating from the Zhou Dynasty (1027-771 BC) to the Spring & Autumn Period (770-476 BC) [The text of Shi Jing, University of Virginia Library].
4 Translation of the examples adopted from “The text of Shi Jing, University of Virginia Library”.

1869
Our examination of the semantic evolution of “shang” from 476 to 221 BC. The examples 14 to 20 are extracted from the works representing the language of the time.

Examples:
14. Qi shang shi zhi shi (Shang jun shu)5
   The men of letter of the past generations.
15. Ke ai feng yu shang zeng (Li Sau)
   Suddenly in the dust and the wind I go upwards.
16. Zai fu shang shi (Zhuangzi)
   The butcher offered food (to his master).
17. Kuxing ling shang ji (Hanfeizi)
   (At the end of the year), the chief of the district of Kuxing reported the demographic and financial statistics to (his) chief.
18. Zhao sheng yu shang (Shujing)6
   Homage ascended to Heaven.
19. Min zhi zhi yu shang, … (Guanzi)
   The fact that the people are governed by the king is …
20. San gu zhi er zu bus hang (Zhanguoce)
   The drum was hit three times but the soldiers did not go forward.

The examples above show four new usages of “shang” with seven new meanings:

As an adjective expressing the time anterior to the present.
Example 14 – “shang”, past + shi, generations”.

As an adverb indication a vertical direction up:
Example 15 – “shang”, upwards + zheng, go”.

As a verb meaning
(i). “offer something to someone in a higher position”.
   Example 16 – “shang”, offer + shi, food”.
(ii). “report to one’s superior”:
   Example 17 – “shang”, report to his chief + ji, the demographic and financial statistics”.
(iii). Go forward:
   Example 20 – “bu, do not + shang, go forward”.

As a noun meaning superiors or elders.

After analysing the examples 1 to 20, we obtain the result as follows:
Thirteen new meanings of “shang” are produced in different textual contexts. These new significations derived from the

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5 Examples 14-17 adopted from “Jianming gu hanyu zidian” (Concise dictionary of Classical Chinese), 1987.
6 Examples 18-20 adopted from Ciyuan (Origin of words, 1984).
The translation of "(examples 3, 4, 8, 9, 12) but not a preposition in Chinese syntax. Generally considered as a preposition. However, it is a locative functions of "shang" analyse different meanings. Since the purpose of this paper is not to examine its historical conception, especially its role in the Chinese people's conception of time and space, we chose the term "linguistic sign" for it and translated it as "above" which is the original meaning of the sign (see "Origin and Evolution of shang" on p. 1) in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

Prototypal meaning "above". According to the contexts in which they are produced, we observed that they derive more and more from the prototype. Based on the degrees of derivation of these new significations, we elaborated the following figure to show how far each of them is from the prototype. The arrow indicates the direction of the semantic derivations.

![Semantic derivations from "shang, above"](image)

**Figure 1.** Semantic derivations from "shang, above"

In this figure, we can see that "on" and "in a higher position" are on the same level as "above". It is because they all indicate a position higher than that of something or somebody else:

- Examples (1) twittering of the swallows from above – the twittering comes from a position higher than that of the person who hears it; (4) "on" or "on the top of" the Hillock of Wan – in a position higher than the top of the Hillock and in contact with the top; (8) the plants growing "over the pine" – they grow in a position higher than the pine and are in contact with the surfaces of the parts of the pine; (9) "King Wen is on high" – the king is in heaven while his people is on earth, thus the former is in a position much higher than that of the latter; (12) "high aloft above me" – in a position higher than that of mine.

In example 15, "shang" has a new meaning according to the context in which it is used: Suddenly in the dust and the wind I go upwards. In this verse, "shang" does not mean "in a higher position" any more. Instead, it indicates the vertically upward direction of "go". The new meaning "upwards" derives then from the prototype "above". Since it indicates the action of moving to a vertically higher position, it is not far from the original meaning. That is why we put it next to the prototype.

The second derivation means "to go or move upwards". Examples (11) – "In his room, I will look for him" to go up and come down in the court"; (13) "The clouds ascended to the sky". This derivation indicates neither a higher position nor a vertically upward direction. It describes exactly what happens, i.e. the motion of going up. So compared with "upwards", "to go up" and "to ascend" derive further away from the prototype "above".

The semantic derivations of "shang, above" go further. The third one has nothing to do with neither a vertically higher position, nor a vertical motion. It expresses the contact or dealing with a person hierarchically higher placed than oneself. Examples (16) – "The butcher offered food (to his master)"; (17) – "... reported the demographic and financial statistics to (his) chief". In these two examples, both "master" and "chief" imply authority and domination of the person who occupies an abstract higher position in hierarchy and "shang" means the contact or dealing with such a person.

The next derivation concerns the social hierarchy: examples (10) – "The (Powers) above" means the superiors or elders; (19) – "...by the king". "Shang" in these examples does not represent a "vertically higher position" but the persons who are socially higher or highest placed.

Further away, there is the fifth new meaning produced. It is about how good something is: example (2) – the superior quality of the horses for dragging carriages. In this example, there is the abstract idea of "higher" in category.

The superlative degree, that is, supreme appears after the "superior quality". Examples: (5) – "the great god"; (6) – "high Heaven"; (7) – "the heavens which are high". In Ancient China's beliefs, Heaven is not an imaginary place in the sky but rather a supernatural power which exists in the sky high above to control everything on earth. Therefore "High Heaven" means actually "the supreme power in the sky", so as "the heavens which are high" which represents "the supreme power high above". As for "the great god", the idea of "supreme" in this example is clearly conveyed.

The eighth derivation is about what belongs to the past: example 14 – "the past (shang) generations (shi)"). In this example, the locative "shang" (spatial) is used to express what existed in the past (temporal). This new derivation of "shang" expresses the vertical direction of time conceptualized in Chinese. We will discuss it in details in the following section.
The second last semantic derivation indicates imprecise positions Examples 3 (a) – “somewhere around the river (b) – by the river. Since this new meaning does not tell exactly where the situation is, it is far from the prototype “above (a vertically higher position)” which is, on the contrary, clear and precise.

Finally, we have the new meaning of “going forward”. Example 20 – “… but the soldiers did not go forward”. This proposition describes the reaction of the soldiers on a battle field in Ancient China. They are supposed to attack after hearing the beating of the drum but they fail to do so. The fact that the soldiers are on a battle field, a plain horizontal surface, suggests that if they move forward, they certainly advance in the horizontal axe. However, in this example, the horizontal movement supposed to be made by the soldiers is expressed by “shang” which implies the vertical axe. This semantic derivation thus changes from vertical dimension to horizontal dimension. To go forward means to move horizontally towards the direction that is in front of you. It has entirely nothing to do with “a vertically higher position”.

Conceptions of “shang”

Before expressing themselves orally or by writing, human beings have to conceptualize, organize and construct an utterance in their brain first. Ancient Chinese people are Homo sapiens. So they also undergo a cognitive process in their brain, which includes conceptualization, organization and construction before expressing themselves.

In the above examples, we can see that the range of meanings expressed by “shang” is very wide. This implies that during the stage of conceptualization, ancient Chinese people choose “shang” to represent concepts of different domains.

After examining the different semantic derivations from “shang”, we find that there are eight groups of concepts derived from the prototypical concept of “above”. These concepts belong to different domains. We arranged them in the way shown in figure 2 on the right.

In this figure, the arrows indicate the derivational directions of the different concepts from the prototypical concept “above”. The circle in the middle is the main domain from which the new concepts derive. We call it “Conceptual Source Domain” and the concept concerned is “a vertically higher position”. There are eight different conceptual domains around the main one, numbered from 1 to 8. Number 1 is the conceptual group closest to the prototypical group. Number 2 is farther, and so on. We numbered these domains according to the semantic resemblances between them and the Conceptual Source Domain and we call them “Conceptual Derivation Domains” (CDD).

![Figure 2. Conceptual derivations of “shang, above”](image)

The Conceptual Source Domain group includes “above”, “on” and “in a higher position” because they have a point in common, that is, in a higher position perceived in the physical world (see the examples above).

The first Conceptual Derivation Domain (CDD1) relates closely to the main domain. It contains the description about motions in a vertical dimension – “upwards” and “to go up/to ascend”. This domain is not about the indication of a higher position but the description of motions towards a higher position. The common point between the main domain and this one is that both of them belong to the concrete vertical dimension, i.e. the vertical actions or positions perceived in the physical world.

CDD2 is about the contact with a person higher placed than oneself – to report or offer something to one’s superior. It has nothing to do with the indication of a vertically higher position in the physical world. Nevertheless, there is an implication of the abstract upward direction of offering and reporting from a lower placed person to a higher placed one. Hence, the “higher position” (of the person higher placed) expressed in this domain is abstract, opposite to the ones mentioned in the above two domains.

CDD3 no longer deals with concrete or abstract “higher positions”. Instead, it covers the “higher/highest placed persons” such as superiors, elders, kings and rulers. The conception of “shang” in this domain changes thus from the description of concrete or abstract “higher positions” to the representation of human beings occupying a higher or the highest position socially or politically. “Shang” used in this domain derives then further more from the prototype “above”.

The fourth CDD includes “superior quality” and “supreme”. Both of them are abstract. The fact that “shang” is used to express them implies that in the mind of the ancient Chinese
people, there is a standard of “measuring” abstract things and “shang” represents the quality “above” the average. As for “supreme” or “high”, the conception is related to the beliefs of the ancient Chinese people. “Shang tian, high heaven/the heavens which are high” and “shang di, the supreme ruler of heaven” represent the power they believed to exist in the Sky. In this case, the derived concept implies that what exists “high above our head” is of the “highest degree”.

The fifth CDD concerns the Supernatural. We divided it as a single domain because in this domain, “shang, Heaven” is conceptualized particularly in relation to the cultural model of the ancient Chinese people. In Ancient China, “shang” means “tian, Sky/Heaven”. It is not an imaginary place where God or gods are. In fact, it implies a supernatural power which exists above and controls everything in this world (see the explanation in the above section of Semantic Derivations of Shang). For example, a Chinese emperor is called “tianzi, the son of Sky/Heaven” because he is said to be sent from the Heaven (which is high above, and so that is why it is called “shang”) to rule the country.

In CDD6, “shang” indicates the time anterior to the present, that is, the past.

As we have seen on p. 1, “shang” in the inscriptions on tortoise shells and ox bones (16th-11th centuries BC) is represented by an indicative symbol “。”. In this graphic, the arc line or the horizontal line is the datum line and the short line above it shows the vertically higher position of an object which is above the datum line. This symbol thus indicates purely the spatial relation between the two objects represented by the datum line and the short line above it. As the centuries pass, the symbol “shang” evolves and becomes the modern Chinese character “上” as shown in figure 3. In this figure, we put two arrows to indicate the horizontal axe represented by the datum line and the vertical axe shown by the short horizontal line above it and the straight line perpendicular to it.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 3. “Shang” – horizontal and vertical axes

In example 14, we saw that “shang” is not used to indicate a position (spatial) but to signify “the past generations” (time). This example shows that ancient Chinese people conceptualized time in terms of space. Besides, time was conceptualized in the vertical axe. Why did ancient Chinese people do so? It is probably by analogy. In their mind, the datum line (horizontal axe) would have represented the present. The time anterior to the present, i.e. the past, would have then been indicated by the short horizontal line above it (vertical axe).

Besides signifying “the past”, “shang” represents “what is before” in order and “the first half” in modern Chinese.

Examples:
20. shang ban nian
   the first half of the year

The concepts shown by the above two examples are the same as the concept of “vertically higher position”. They all start from a datum line and then go upwards.

The seventh CDD expresses imprecise positions – “somewhere around the river” and “by the river”. This concept of imprecision derives very far from the prototypical concept “above” which is on the contrary, precise.

In the last CDD, “shang” does not mean “a higher position” but a horizontal motion to the direction in front of one, i.e. to go forward. This fact implies that in this domain, the dimension suggested by the prototypical concept of “shang” changes from vertical to horizontal. This phenomenon is significant because it shows that ancient Chinese people had the ability to conceptualize the horizontal dimensional motion (to go forward) in terms of the spatial vertical dimensional position (above).

Conclusion

From 16th century to 221 BC, ancient Chinese people conceptualized fourteen meanings of the linguistic sign “shang”8. These meanings cover a wide range of concepts belonging to different domains. Ancient Chinese people are Homo sapiens. The fact that they had the ability to express different kinds of concepts by the word “shang” implies that human beings’ ability of conceptualization and their ability to express themselves with what they have conceptualized are very large.

As for the conceptualization of time – in terms of space and in the vertical axe – by ancient Chinese people, analogy is the determinative factor of this cognitive process.

Finally, ancient Chinese people’s cultural model plays also an important role in the conceptualization of the different significations of “shang”.

Main References


8 There are more meanings of “shang” in this period. We have only mentioned the more current ones found in the works of the time. We cannot analyse all the meanings of “shang” because of the length of the paper.


