The Intersection of Written Language and Dialects: The Centrality of the Lexical Morphemes

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The dichotomy of Chinese writing and dialects is a well-established fact. Throughout Chinese history, Chinese writing has served as the lingua franca of communication throughout the Sinitic empire. It transcends great diversity in regional speeches and yet at the same time connects them to the same sets of written edicts and literary heritage.

This presentation argues that it is the lexical morpheme – the basic semantic component of the language -- in the Chinese language that serves as the unifying force between the written and the spoken forms.

Traditional Chinese scholars have pointed out three components of the Chinese language: 音, 形, 义. To understand the relationship of these three elements, I have devised a test. When a bilingual person of Chinese and English is given only seconds, the reading of three separate texts – Character, Pinyin, and English – will show that the process of comprehension follows two tracks:

形－义 (reading)
音－义 (speech)

The first relates to reading. In reading a text, one directly infers the meaning from the semantic components in the characters. The sound is not involved in the process, unless it is a rhyming text such as poetry and prose. The second explains the process of speech. The sound is the primary player in transmitting the meaning.

Given this dichotomy, how do the two processes intersect? The answer is the lexical morphemes, or 实词. This presentation will demonstrate from three perspectives how this connection works:

1) The role 实词 plays in generating new words historically and in modern times in written language;
2) Fuzhou, as most dialects, has far fewer multisyllabic words compared to written Mandarin. The non-Mandarin dialectal vocabulary stays close to the classical Chinese roots. Thus the semantic connection between the written language and the local dialect is primarily established through lexical morphemes, or 实词。
3) In the new words being circulated on the internet, the presence of lexical morpheme may affect their existing power and lifespan.