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

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Over 90% of Chinese characters are compound words that contain both phonetic and semantic signifiers. Yet the signifiers are at best suggestive, pale in comparison to the relative stability of English spelling, root words, or affixes. Active compounding in Chinese word formation today – in part driven by the limited ability to disambiguate existing words due to Mandarin’s relative small phonological inventory – only compounds the ambiguity of the signifiers.

Fuzhou dialect is primarily a spoken language. But it uses the same written form as Mandarin Chinese. More important, it shares the main body of lexical morphemes with Mandarin. This study will illustrate that as a spoken language, Fuzhou has developed an elaborate sandhi mechanism to diversify and expand the use of the root words. It leverages all parts of the syllable – tone, initial, vowel, final consonant – to signify the grammatical, syntactic, and semantic differences of its core lexical words.

I will argue that this elaborate sandhi system cuts out a path of evolution distinctively different from that of Mandarin’s:

1) Fuzhou’s rich phonological inventory as well as active and extensive sandhi mechanism curtail the need for the two major means of word expansion in Mandarin Chinese: affixation and compounding.
   a) Fuzhou’s right-heavy sandhi pattern is self-limiting in suffixes. But the position for prefixes is without constraint, and the variations in this slot do flourish in the Fuzhou dialect.
   b) As the sandhi rules are for the most part capable of disambiguating word from phrase as well as semantic nuances, it at the same time reduces the need for extensive compounding as found in Mandarin Chinese.

2) Adaptability: Fuzhou is able to freely import newly created Mandarin words, using a set of literary readings and fit them neatly into proper sandhi domains.

3) One possible blind spot: overlapping sound changes from different sandhi rules may clash to produce the same resulting pronunciations, reducing the function to differentiate. But a stand-in syllable in this case would suffice to clarify.

This study has several implications to areas beyond the confines of Fuzhou dialect:

1) As Fuzhou sandhi system functions as an underlying map for the phonological and grammatical processes in the dialect, it helps to understand how historically over time, Chinese dialects evolve farther away from the writing system representing a common language, and yet still retain the connection to, and the use of that writing system;
2) And in turn, how characters still retain a hold on a large number of diverse dialects that for the most part are either mutually unintelligible, or unintelligible to Mandarin speakers: the core lexical morphemes tie them together as root words in English. In the end, the ambiguity of the semantic and phonetic components in compound characters may after all be critical to the unifying power of the Chinese writing system: Their suggestive nature is accommodating to different regional differences and not exacting or confining to exclude them.