



More than words

By Harmen Mesker | 13 augustus 2012 | Character analysis, English



(Most of the oracle bone images in this article are from the site of [Richard Sears](#). Quotes from classics are from the site of [Donald Sturgeon](#).)

The Chinese character *yan* 言 is one of the most common words in the Chinese language, it is among the characters that you learn at an early stage when you study the Chinese language. The Hanyu Da Cidian 漢語大詞典 dictionary lists more than 30 meanings for this character, meanings which mostly have to do with words and language in general (vol. 11, p. 1). But the early usage of this character can enhance our understanding of the meaning and usage of this word in the Yijing.



The oracle bone versions and the bronze versions of *yan* have two components: a mouth 口 and 彳. The last component, modern form *xin* 辛, is burdened with various explanations of its form:

獨體象物字，從吳其昌釋：“象斧屬兵器形。白虎通五行篇云，‘辛所以煞傷也。’必兵器始能殺傷...” 本義是斧屬兵器。攷甲骨文作
Single-component-image character, according to [Wu Qichang](#)'s explanation: “image of a weapon axe. The *Wuxing* chapter in the *Bohutong* says, ‘*xin* therefore kills and injures’. Certainly a weapon can kill and injure.... The original meaning is a kind of weapon axe. 马如森, ‘殷墟甲骨学’, p. 516

Xin. Composed of 羊 and 上 (ancient form 二 or 上); to offend 羊 one's 上 superior.
Wieger, *Chinese Characters*, p. 250

從早期金文的字形來看，辛象一把形似圓鑿而末尾尖銳的刀具之形，是一種用來黥面的刑具。
Looking at the form in early bronze inscriptions *xin* resembles a chisel with at the end a sharp cutting tool, it is a kind of instrument for tattooing the face as a punishment.
谢光辉, ‘汉语字源字典’, p. 156

When *xin* is explained as a component of *yan* the picture suddenly becomes entirely different:

會意字。言與音同源。甲骨文從口，上像簫管樂器形，會口吹樂器之意。金文大同。篆文整齊化。樂器詭為辛聲。隸變后楷書寫作言。
Ideographic character. *Yan* 言 and *yin* 音 ('sound' HM) have the same origin. In oracle bone inscriptions it is a mouth (口) with above it the shape of a double flute, it has the meaning of a mouth blowing on a wind instrument. The bronze version is similar, the *seal script* version became more regular. The musical instrument erroneously became 辛 for the sound. The *lishu script* later on changed to *kaishu script* which writes 言。
谷衍奎, ‘漢字源流字典’, p. 299

I don't find the last explanation convincing, I believe that the *xin* 辛 + *kou* 口 explanation is the right one since we clearly find these components in the early forms of *yan* 言. Gu Yankui 谷衍奎 his explanation might be inspired by the [Erya 爾雅 dictionary](#) which [says](#) that a *yan* 言 is a name for a large flute.

On oracle bones *yan* is similar to *yin* 音 (劉興隆, ‘新編甲骨文字典’, p. 121-122; 于省吾, ‘甲骨文字釋林’, p. 87-88), which apart from its ordinary meaning of ‘sound’ is also used as the early form of *xin* 歆, meaning 歆饗/歆享, ‘to offer/entertain’. This meaning was also used in later bronze inscriptions (陳初生, ‘金文常用字典’, p. 239).



There is another oracle bone character which has the same components and looks similar to *yan*. The *Xinbian Jiaguwen Zidian* 新編甲骨文字典 by Liu Xinglong 劉興隆 mentions the character 音:

𠄎(音)與𠄎(辛)同。辛為刑刀，𠄎為正面，𠄎則為側面，可釋𠄎為音或奇。
𠄎(音) and 𠄎(辛) are the same. 辛 is a punishing knife, 𠄎 is a frontal view of it, while 𠄎 is a side view. Therefore 𠄎 can be explained as 音 or 奇。
劉興隆, ‘新編甲骨文字典’, p. 60

The character 音 and its variant form 𠄎 – which closely resembles the oracle bone form – are related to *yan* 言 as they share the same components. Liu says it functioned as the name of a person or a location, but adds that it is also used as a different form of 孽 which he explains as ‘calamity, disaster’ (p. 970; see also 趙

誠, '甲骨文簡明詞典', p. 283 & 326). The old form of 孽 has the component 辛 as well, but 自 instead of 口. There are several oracle bone inscriptions in which 言 can be read with the meaning of 'disaster, calamity':

癸卯卜宀貞告王言于丁

Divination done on day *gui-mao*, diviner Mian interprets to inform whether the king will meet **disaster** at place Ding.
(甲骨文合集 1956; transcript from 胡厚宣, '甲骨文合集釋文')



It is because of the similarity between 言 and 音 that Gao Heng 高亨 writes in his 周易古經今注 at the second line of hexagram 5:

言疑當作音. 篆文言作 音, 音作 音, 形近而譌. 說文: "音, 直言曰言, 論難曰語. 从口, 辛聲. 音, 語相訶距也. 从口辛. 辛, 惡聲也, 讀若藥." 攷甲骨文言作 言 (殷虛書契-前編, 卷五, 第二十葉) 言 (殷虛書契-後編下, 第十葉). 音作 音 (殷虛書契-前編, 卷四, 第二十八葉) 言 (殷虛書契-前編, 卷六, 第二十九葉) 二字釐然有別.

I suspect that 言 should be regarded as 音. In Seal script 言 is written as 言, 音 is written as 音, their forms are close yet different. The Shuowen says: "音, honest words are called *yan* 言(音), debate is called *yu* 語. From 口, 辛 marks the sound. 音 is debating by scolding each other. From 口 and 辛. 辛 is foul language, read as 藥 (variant form of 孽 'doubt, distrust, wrongdoing' HM). In oracle bone script 言 is written as 言, 音 is written as 音言, the characters clearly are different.

高亨, '周易古經今注', p. 176

Although Gao says that the old form of 言 is clearly different from the old form of 音/音 he believes that in the Yijing 言 should be read as 音:

易此言字乃訶譴之義, 當作音, 不當作言.

The character 言 in the Yi then has the meaning of *heqian* 訶譴, 'to scold, to reprimand', it should be treated as 音, not as 言.

This is not the only explanation in which *yan* is read with a negative tone. Wen Yiduo 聞一多 proposed a different reading which became quite popular as it is mentioned in a lot of authoritative sources like for instance the 漢語大詞典 and 古代漢語通假字大字典:

案言皆讀為愆. 言辛古當同字. 《說文》曰: "辛, 辛也, 讀若愆." 《詩·雲漢》"昭假無贏", 馬瑞辰釋無贏為無過, 余謂語與《烈祖》"昭假無言" 同, 無言即無愆, 愆亦過也. 字或逕作愆.

I propose that 言 should be read as *qian* 愆. In ancient times 言 and 辛 were the same character. The Shuowen says, "辛 is 辛, it should be read as 愆." In Shijing poem 'Milky Way' it says, "come brightly forward none remaining (無贏)" (Ode M258, tr. Karlgren HM), Ma Ruichen explains 無贏 as 無過, 'without fault, without blame', this is similar to '無言' in Shijing poem 'Lie Zhu' ('嚴假無言' in Ode M302, translated by Karlgren as 'we come forward and arrive silently' HM). *Wu yan* 無言 is *wu qian* 無愆, *qian* 愆 is also *guo* 過, 'mistake'. Because of this perhaps 言 should be taken as 愆, 'fault, blame'.

聞一多全集, Vol. 10, p. 249

Many books repeat this view without question. But as is clear from the translations by Karlgren in the quote above he did not agree:

Yan 言 as loan for *qian* 愆 'fault' says Wen Yiduo on Ode 302 phrase 嚴假無言: "They arrive without fault". He adduces as parallel Ode 256 phrase 不遐有愆 "(It is not far from there being fault:) there is risk that you will be at fault". — Reject. There is no parallelism between 嚴假無言 and 不遐有愆. In 嚴假無言 the character 言 has its ordinary meaning: "We come and arrive (without speech:) silently", emphasized by the next line 時靡有爭, "Now there is no contention".

Wen further adduces various passages in the Yi where we find the phrase 有言, e.g. *gua* 36 主人有言, *gua* 51 婚媾有言, and Wen all through takes 言 as loan for 愆. — Reject. *Yan* 言 in these cases means 'talk' in the sense of 'censure, criticism' hence also 'fault-finding, blame'. 主人有言 = "The host has occasion to gossip about him"(criticize him); 婚媾有言 = "His relatives (comrades) have talk about him (censure him)".

B. Karlgren, *Loan Characters in Pre-Han Texts*, entry 2015

Karlgren reads *yan* 言 as 'to criticize, to blame' and this is close to the meaning of 音/音, 'to scold, to reprimand'. But if this meaning fits *yan*, does it mean that it fits every instance of *yan* in the Yijing? Let's find out. *Yan* appears twelve times in the core text of the Yijing. I discern four patterns in which *yan* is used:

X 有言

X 言不信

X 言

言有 X

X 有言

5-2: 小有言.

6-1: 小有言.

36-1: 主人有言.

51-6: 婚媾有言.

53-1: 小子厲有言.

I'll start with 36-1, 51-6 and 53-1 because these lines show how 5-2 and 6-1 should be read. 36-1 talks about a *zhuren* 主人: a host (someone receiving guests), a chief household responsible for the slaves, a master. In other words it is a person: 'the host criticizes him'.

Digression:

Although I believe that hexagram 36 has a hunting theme (I'm tentatively translating the first line of hexagram 36 明夷于飛.垂其翼.君子于行.三日不食.有攸往.主人有言 as 'the Ming Yi bird flies, spreading its wings. The *junzi* on his way (while pursuing the bird) does not eat for three days. If he travels far (to the outskirts of the territory) his master will blame him') I also see parallels with another theme in line 1. *Zhuren* 主人 also refers to the **chief mourner** at burial ceremonies, often the son of the deceased. It is possible that 36-1 talks about a mourning ritual. 三日不食, 'not eat for three days' was a customary practice for relatives of the deceased:

君之喪，子、大夫、公子、眾士皆三日不食...

At the mourning rites for a ruler, his (eldest) son, Great officers, his other sons and all the (other) officers (employed about the court), ate nothing for three days...

斬衰，三日不食；齊衰，二日不食...

When a mourner has assumed the sackcloth for a father, for three days he abstains from food; for a mother, for two days...

The Classic of Rites, tr. James Legge

Using this information we could also translate the first line as 'the Ming Yi bird flies, spreading its wings. The *junzi* in his conduct will not eat for three days. If he goes far away the chief mourner will have complaints.' I must admit I find this translation not very convincing, but the link 'chief mourner' – 'three days not eat' is quite compelling.

End of digression. My point is that a *zhuren* is a person. Turning to 51-6, 婚媾有言, we also have (a) person(s): *hungou* 婚媾 is 'relatives by marriage' (漢語大詞典, vol. 4, p. 374): 'his relatives will criticize him'. At 53-1 we have *xiaozi* 小子, a term for the common or low people (漢語大詞典, vol. 2, p. 1588): 'the people sternly will criticize him (translating *li* 厲 as 嚴肅, 嚴厲 'stern, serious'. See also Lun Yu 論語 19-9: 聽其言也厲 'when he is heard to speak he is firm and decided (厲)'. It has a sense of 'urging, add pressure', see definitions in 漢語大詞典, vol. 1, p. 936).

At 5-2 and 6-1 we have 小有言. This is most often translated as 'there is some/a little gossip' (Wilhelm), 'a little gossip/a little dispute' (Huang), 'There is some talk' (LiSe), 'use small words' (Karcher), 'there are small words' (Barrett), taking *xiao* 小 as an adjective of *yan* 言. But the other phrases in which 有言 is used tell us that it should be (a) person(s) who criticizes. I believe **Hatcher** is right when he translates these lines as 'the small will talk'. There are other texts in which *xiao* is used with the meaning of *xiaoren* 小人:

憂心悄悄，慍于群小。

My anxious heart is full of trouble;

I am hated by the herd of **mean creatures**.

Shijing, Ode M26, tr. Legge

At 5-2 and 6-1 'the common (or petty) people will criticize', but the ending will be auspicious (終吉).

X 言不信

The expression 言不信 occurs in several early texts. It mainly tells about words reaching the subject, instead of words being uttered by the subject:

下之事上也，身不正，言不信。

In the service by an inferior of his superior, if his personal character be not correct, his words will not be sincere.

- *Liji* 禮記 (tr. Legge, corrected)

信言不美，美言不信。

Sincere words are not fine; fine words are not sincere.

- *Dao De Jing* 道德經 (tr. Legge)

如何昊天。辟言不信。

How is it, great Heaven?

The words of the rulers are not reliable.

- *Shi Jing* 詩經 (tr. Karlgren)

言之不可復者，其言不信也。

Words not fit to be reiterated are not trustworthy.

- *Guanzi* 管子 (tr. Rickett)

In other words, 言不信 are insincere words coming to you instead of being spoken by you. This is obvious in 43-4 where it says 聞言不信, 'hear words that are not sincere', but it could also fit the Judgement of hexagram 47, where we have 有言不信: 'there are words that are not sincere'. But the examples given also show that 不信 applies to the *words* instead of the *person*: the words themselves are not sincere, it is not that the listener does not believe them. We have an insincere speaker here, instead of an unbelieving listener. But can we translate *yan* 言 in these sentences as 'criticize'? Because (言)不信 seems to be a common expression I think that in these lines 言 carries its ordinary meaning of 'spoken words'.

X 言

Actually it is not right to put all occurrences of X 言 under one heading, as the grammar in the sentences differs. Let's start with 7-5: 利執言. *Zhi* 執 has meanings

like 'to control', 'to grasp', 'persist in, stick to' (漢語大詞典, vol. 2, p. 1131). *Zhiyan* 執言 then means 'to stick to one's words (and not withdraw them)'. In this case the meaning of 'criticism' for *yan* 言 is also fitting: It is good (利) not to withdraw your remarks but stand by them, even though you will meet resistance. (The 漢語大詞典 comes with a different reading for 言 in 7-5. It says that 言 should be read as *xun* 訊, 'to dispatch (a message)': '軍中通訊問之人, 指間諜之類', 'a person in the army who delivers messages, a kind of spy' (vol. 11, p. 1) I have not been able to find sources for this assumption.)

Digression: There are two words in the Yi that both have the sense of 'good, auspicious': *li* 利 and *ji* 吉. The difference between them is that *li* applies to something that you can *do*, an action, while *ji* applies to the *situation* (or outcome). End of digression.

49-3 tells about 革言三就. Ge 革 is a radical change (by force), *jiu* means 'to follow, to seek, to strive for, completion' (漢語大詞典, vol. 2, p. 1575): only when the words of change-by-force are spoken three times (after three divination sessions) you will have **the blessing and protection of the ancestors** (有孚). Reading *yan* 言 as 'criticize' is possible here, since a radical change has to be motivated, often by criticism.

51-0: 笑言啞啞

51-1: (後)笑言啞啞

These sentences are actually quite simple: they speak of *xiaoyan* 笑言, 'laughter and words', 'jokes'. The meaning of 'criticize' does not seem to fit here.

言有 X

The last pattern we have to discuss occurs in 52-5: 言有序, 'the words have 序'. *Xu* 序 means 'order(-ly), well arranged', 'peaceful'. The grammar in this sentence dictates that *yan* 言 has to be a noun here instead of a verb. Since *yan* can not be read as 'criticism' but only as 'to criticize' we can retain the original; meaning of 'words' here. 'The words are orderly (and peaceful)'. Criticism would not fit the image of hexagram 52 either.

Conclusion

I think this study shows that even the simplest of words can have deeper meanings, depending on usage and context. What applies to the character *yan* applies to the Yijing as well: the book is more than words.

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