More than words

By Harmen Meester | 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.

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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.

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 尔雅 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 it's ordinary meaning of 'sound' is also used as the early form of xin 徵, meaning 歲饗/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 訒:

The character 訒 and its variant form 訒 – 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 訒 which he explains as 'calamity, disaster' (p. 970; see also 赵易學).
The old form of  azi has the component 辛 as well, but it is instead of 口. There are several oracle bone inscriptions in which  azi can be read with the meaning of ‘disaster, calamity’.

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 156, transcript from 茅厚宣, '甲骨文合集释文')

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

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

The character 言 in the Yi then has the meaning of heqian 俏詞, ‘to scold, to reprimand’, it should be treated as 言, not as 言.

This is not the only explanation in which yan is read with a negative tone. Wen Yiduo 閻一多 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:

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

Karlgren reads yan 言 as ‘to criticize, to blame’ and this is close to the meaning of 同, ‘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 嫦娥有言.
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 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 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:

*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... 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): 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 小人, a term for the common or low people (漢語大詞典, vol. 2, p. 1588): 'the people sternly will criticize him (translating 見 者 as 嚴肅, 羅為' stern, serious'. See also Lun Yu 論語 19-9: 聽其言也 見 when he is heard to speak he is firm and decided (見). 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), taking 小 as an adjective of 言. But the other phrases in which 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 小 is used with the meaning of 小人:

*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:

- 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 聽言不信, 'hear words that are not sincere', but it could also fit the Judgement of hexagram 47, where we have 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 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, 言 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 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 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':  利 and 吉. The difference between them is that  利 applies to something that you can do, an action, while 吉 applies to the situation (or outcome). End of digression.

49-3 tells about 革言三就. 革 is a radical change (by force), 九 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 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  笑言, 'laughter and words', 'jokes'. The meaning of 'criticize' does not seem to fit here.

言有序
The last pattern we have to discuss occurs in 52-5:  言有序, 'the words have 序', 'the words are orderly (and peaceful). The grammar in this sentence dictates that 言 has to be a noun here instead of a verb. Since 言 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 言 applies to the Yijing as well: the book is more than words.

More than words - 易學
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