

SUBSTITUTION BY HOMOPHONES IN CHINESE AND CHANGES TO OLD STREET NAMES IN BEIJING AFTER 1949

Key words: substitution by homophones, Chinese homophonic words, Chinese reshaping of names, Chinese toponyms resulting from the method of the substitution by homophones, old hutong names in Beijing

Every language contains a certain number of homophones, i.e. words pronounced alike but spelt/written differently, and having different meanings. Chinese notably contains a large amount of homophones, termed in Chinese as *tóngyīnyìyìcí* 同音异义词, *tóngyīnyìxíngcí* 同音异形词 (Hartman, Stork, 1972), *tóngyīnyìzì* 同音异字 (Qin, 1980, p. 3), or *xiéyīn* 谐音 (Liu, 1982, p. 25).

The pervasive presence of homophony in Chinese is readily discernible, with elements found throughout many linguistic and cultural fields. This situation results from two main factors: the nature of the Chinese language and the historical sound changes of the Chinese spoken language, i.e. a strong tendency towards the sound-simplification in the evolution of the language.

Some major characteristics of the Chinese language are the primary cause of the existence of a limited amount of distinct syllables and therefore of the abundance of homophones. These main characteristics are the monosyllabic, isolating, non-inflectional nature of the Chinese language, its phonological system of a limited number of initials and finals of syllables, the limited number of its tonal categories, and therefore a reduced number of possible different syllables.

In Middle Chinese (approximately the 6th century) there were 1,033 possible combinations of the initials and finals, which — multiplied by 4 tones — yielded 4,132 possible syllables. *Qieyun* 切韵, a pronunciation dictionary compiled in 601, contained about 12,000 characters, meaning that on average each character/word had 3 homophones. In fact, cases are to be found where up to 47 characters/words share the same pronunciation (Sung, 1979, p. 16).

As the Middle Chinese language already possessed an inconvenient number of homophones, the further simplification of sounds aggravated the difficulty even further. In Modern Standard Chinese, the initials and finals have 415 possible combinations that multiplied by 4 tones yield 1,660 possible syllables.

According to *Xin Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 新现代汉语词典 [New Dictionary of the Modern Chinese Language] (XXHC, 1992), which includes about 1,3000 characters, every character/morpheme/word can have about 8 homophones. However, these characters/morphemes/words are not uniformly distributed among the syllables, therefore the number of homophones in a series can be sometimes smaller, sometimes larger. One can find up to 70 characters/words sharing the same pronunciation.

In written Chinese, a character or grapheme, *zì* 字, is the linguistic equivalent of a monosyllabic morpheme/word. As in a morpho-syllabic writing system, the Chinese graphemic structures are linked to meaningful morphemes in the spoken language. Therefore, a character has a more direct association with its meaning, while its association with phonology is rather arbitrary and limited.

The large amount of homophones is more or less harmful to the intelligibility of the Chinese spoken language, and especially proper names as mainly monosyllabic or bisyllabic forms occurring out of context. It is evident that Chinese onyms can fully reveal their intended meaning if they are written down. The spoken form of a name can be misunderstood or misconstrued, due to the abundance of homophones in the Chinese language and the variety of Chinese dialects and languages.

Fortunately, the Chinese symbolic and not strictly phonetic writing distinguishes to the eye what is homophonic to the ear. The written form distinguishes the morpheme/word from several homophonic ones, because almost every single morpheme/word has its own character indicating the meaning of the word without direct reference to the pronunciation or to the subsequent changes in the pronunciation. For example, there are 14 Chinese morphemes/words spelt *yī*, all bearing various meanings and written in different characters: 一, 衣, 伊, 医, 依, 咿, 铍, 猗, 揖, 壹, 漪, 噫, 繫, 黠 (HYC, 1997; Kalużyńska, 2015, p. 81).

SUBSTITUTION BY HOMOPHONES IN THE FIELD OF CHINESE ONYMS

There are many Chinese proper names (place names, personal names and other) making use of or resulting from the method of the substitution by homophones, in Chinese generally termed *tóngyīnzì dàiì* 同音字代替 (Wang, 1984, p. 110), or *xiéyīn zhuǎnyì biànhuà* 谐音转义变化 (Liu, 1982, p. 25). In the case of Chinese onyms, some other terms for the substitution by homophones occur, and these are, for example, *yǐ yīn gēngmíng fǎ* 以音更名法 'method of phonetic changing of names' (Qin, 1980, p. 3), or *xiéyīn huàn míng* 谐音换名 'changing of names by homophones' (Zhang, 1988, p. 3).

The method of the substitution by homophones is mainly used in order to reshape already existing names by replacing their previous form, which are for

whatever reason unwanted. However, it is also broadly applied to create new names by using words which are homophonic with the words denoting the idea they symbolize (Kałużyńska, 2015, pp. 79–91).

Homophones have played a very important role in the field of Chinese geographical names. The substitution by homophones has been treated as a very convenient means for changing already existing names. This kind of substitution preserved only the sound of the name, blurred its etymological and semantic clarity, and resulted in a different way of writing the name by using a different character or characters (Kałużyńska, 2002, pp. 220–237).

Chinese scholars usually treat all place names resulting from changes by substitution by homophones as mainly alterations of the written form of the former toponyms. However, some divisions of Chinese place names have a separate group for such names, namely “place names originated as homophones”, *yúan yú xiéshēng de dì míng* 源于谐声的地名 (Rong, 1984, p. 10).

In China, changes to already existing place names were largely a matter of custom, and sometimes it is almost impossible to ascertain the real reasons for such changes. However, as the main reasons for changing toponyms are considered (Kałużyńska, 1995, pp. 126–129; 2002, pp. 220–237; 2008; 2015, pp. 82–85; Sulikowska, 1987, pp. 175–182):

- (1) a personal names taboo, i.e. avoidance of using the personal name of a ruler, an elder or one higher in rank in speech or writing, also an avoidance of names homophonic to appellatives bearing an unpleasant or unlucky meaning;
- (2) efforts to eliminate some reminiscences of previous times, unpleasant or undesirable from a political or social point of view;
- (3) efforts to eliminate duplicate place names;
- (4) efforts to simplify the Chinese writing.

Some of the above mentioned reasons for changing toponyms will be explained and exemplified below.

SUBSTITUTION BY HOMOPHONES OF OLD CHINESE STREET NAMES IN BEIJING

Many interesting examples of changes to street names by means of the method of substitution by homophones are to be found among names of streets (*hùtóng* 胡同 ‘small street, lane, alley’) in Beijing (Liu, 1982, pp. 25–26; Weng, 1992; Zhang, 1997). Old, original names, created up to 1949, underwent various changes sometimes before, but mainly just after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

The research material consists of 1,159 hutong names in Beijing, and 272 of them have been changed by the use of the method of substitution by homophones, accounting for 23,5% of the total.

It seems that there were four main reasons for changes to hutong names in Beijing:

- (1) some names were considered improper and unsophisticated,
- (2) taboo avoidance of some words,
- (3) elimination of duplicate names,
- (4) misunderstanding of names meaning and/or circumstances of their origin.

(1) Numerous changes to already existing place names in China were caused by various efforts to eliminate some reminiscences of previous reigns, unpleasant or undesirable from a political, administrative or social point of view. Such changes accompanied the settlement of a new dynasty or a new ruler within a dynasty, a very significant event occurring in the given area, or they resulted from the social reasons or intellectual changes in Chinese society.

Many names of Beijing streets were simply considered unsophisticated and improper for the capital of the new China (the PRC), so they underwent various changes. One can read: “*chángjiàn de shì xiéyīn zhuǎnhuàn, yǐ yìsī hǎode tóngyīnzì, qūdàile yuánzì* 常见的是谐音转换, 以意思好的同音字, 取代了原字 ‘substitution by homophones was common, original character/words were substituted by homophones having good meaning’” (Weng, 1992, p. 17), e.g.:

Shīkelàng Hùtóng 屎壳郎胡同 ‘Dung Beetle Hutong’ into Shíkè Liàng Hùtóng 时刻亮胡同 ‘Bright Time Hutong’;

Gǒu Wěiba Hùtóng 狗尾巴胡同 ‘Dog’s Tail Hutong’ into Gāo Yì Bó Hùtóng 高义伯胡同 ‘High Justice Earl/Uncle Hutong’;

Niúxuè Hùtóng 牛血胡同 ‘Cow’s Blood Hutong’ into Liúxué Hùtóng 留学胡同 ‘Studying Abroad Hutong’.

(2) Changes of hutong names were also caused by the taboo avoidance of some names and words. The phenomenon of a personal name taboo, *bìhuì* 避讳 or *bìjì* 避忌, or *jìhuì* 忌讳, i.e. an avoidance of using the private name, *míng* 名, of a ruler, an elder or one higher in rank in speech and writing, caused these words and characters used for writing them down to be avoided, so that the private names could not be used in inauspicious circumstances. If these particular characters/words were used for other proper names or appellatives, they had to be eliminated or substituted there by other characters/words.

Taboo avoidance could also occur when some words used in names were identical or homophonous with words denoting some “ugly” or “improper” ideas or objects (Kalużyńska, 1995, pp. 175–182; 2002, pp. 145–147, 229–232; Sulikowska, 1987, pp. 175–189).

The Chinese scholar, Zhang Changqing, described the situation as “*gǎi míng yóuyú tā fàn jìhuì* 改名由于它犯忌讳 ‘change of the name, because it violated the taboo’” (Zhang, 1997, p. 342), e.g.:

Luányíwèi Hùtóng 銮仪卫胡同 ‘Imperial Carriage Ceremony Guard Hutong’ changed into Luányúwèi Hùtóng 銮舆卫胡同 ‘Imperial Carriage Public Guard Hutong’, because of the private name of the last Chinese emperor Puyi 溥仪 (reigned as a child 1909–1911).

Guāncài Yuán/Hùtóng 官菜园/胡同 ‘Official Vegetable Garden/Hutong’ changed into Guānyuánr Hùtóng 官园儿胡同 ‘Official Garden Hutong’, because *guāncài* 官菜 is homophonic to *guāncái* 棺材 ‘coffin’.

Tùyàngshān Hùtóng 兔样山胡同 ‘Rabbit Shape Mountain Hutong’ into Túyàngshān Hùtóng 图样山胡同 ‘Pattern Mountain Hutong’, because *tù* 兔 ‘rabbit’ is avoided in Beijing as a derogatory appellation for a man, *nánjī* 男妓 ‘male prostitute’.

(3) Among Chinese toponyms one can find many duplicate ones. The situation has been caused by the lack in the past of the effective administration control over place names in this huge country. For example, after the foundation of the Republic of China in 1911, there were 92 duplicate names of the administrative divisions at the county level (Kałużyńska, 2002, p. 232).

In contemporary China there are no duplicate names of larger administrative units, however duplicates still can be found among names of smaller administrative divisions or geographical features.

According to the Chinese scholar, Weng Li, there were many duplicate names among hutong names in Beijing, e.g. there were 10 names of Jǐngér Hùtóng 井儿胡同 ‘Well Hutong’ and 10 names of Biǎndān Hùtóng 扁担胡同 ‘Carring Pole/Shoulder Pole Hutong’ (Weng, 1992, p. 17).

One of the new names for Biǎndān Hùtóng 扁担胡同 ‘Carring Pole/Shoulder Pole’ was homophonic to the previous name: Píngtǎn Hùtóng 平坦胡同 ‘Level/Even Hutong’.

(4) Changes to hutong names were caused by misunderstandings of their original meaning and/or circumstances of their origin. Old hutong names in Beijing were sometimes misunderstood by local officials and people, as they were connected with some places, events, administrative units or persons of the remote past.

A Chinese scholar, Zhang Qingchang, considers that the reason of their changes was just the misunderstanding: “*gǎi míng yóuyú bù dǒng* 改名由于不懂 ‘change of the name, because it was misunderstood’” (Zhang, 1997, p. 343). Therefore, there are some hutong names that resulted from a rather unintended failure in transmission or reinterpretation of the meaning of some obscure names.

These names can also be called mistake-names, *chuán’è dì míng* 传说地名, or names resulting from folk-etymology, *mínjiān cíyuán* 民间词源, *liúsù cíyuán*

流俗词源 (Dang, 1989). They arose secondarily from other names by the use of homophones or words which sounded similar, e.g.:

Xīhéyíng Hùtóng 西河营胡同 'West River/ Xihe [place name in Shanxi Province] Camp Hutong' changed into Xīhúyíng Hùtóng 西湖营胡同 'West Lake [famous lake in Hangzhou] Camp Hutong' (Zhang, 1997, p. 344).

Jīzhōuwèi Hùtóng 济州卫胡同 'Ji Zhou (old place name in Shandong Province) Camp Hutong' changed into Jīzhīwèi Hùtóng 机织卫胡同 'Machine Weaving Camp Hutong' (Zhang, 1997, p. 347).

Wú Liáng Dàrén Hùtóng 吴良大人胡同 'Wu Liang [famous official of the Ming Dynasty] Excellency Hutong' into Wú Liáng Dàrén Hùtóng 无量大人胡同 'Boundless/Immeasurable Excellencies Hutong' (present name Hóngxīng Hùtóng 红星胡同 'Red Star Hutong') (Zhang, 1997, p. 347).

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that names are not treated by Chinese society as purely onymic units, solely identifying places or people, but rather as semantically motivated lexical units, and as those more typical for the appellative sphere of the language. For the Chinese, the semantic-functional relation between a name and an appellative practically exists, and names tend to preserve their appellative content.

Substitution by homophones as the method of reshaping already existing place names is a procedure of the mainly conscious reinterpretation of names in order to replace their previous forms, which for some reason are unwanted. The great liability to such changes in Chinese toponymy is due to the nature of Chinese language, especially its abundance of homophones and its writing system.

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SUMMARY

The paper discusses the method of the substitution by homophones that is extensively used in many fields in China, among others onomastics, such as toponymy or anthroponymy. The Chinese language has always contained a considerable number of homophones, i.e. words pronounced alike but spelt/written differently and having different meanings. The situation resulted from two main factors: the nature of the Chinese language and the sound changes to spoken Chinese language,

i.e. a strong tendency to sound simplification. The method of the substitution by homophones is mainly aimed at reshaping already existing names by replacing their previous form, for some reasons unwanted. However, it is also broadly applied to create new names by using words which are homophonic with the words denoting the idea they symbolize. The paper presents some various reasons and aims of the use of the method in the domain of Chinese geographical names, and the more detailed analysis of its use in the changing of old street (hutong) names after 1949 in Beijing. The research material consists of 1,159 hutong names, and the names changed by the use of the method accounts for 23.5% of the total.