

The Polymorphism of *Lianmianci* and Its Standardization Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Lianmianci(联绵词) are a special type of disyllabic monosyllabic words in the history of Chinese vocabulary. Compared with traditional disyllabic words, *Lianmianci* have unique characteristics in form, sound, and meaning. In particular, it is a common phenomenon that the same *Lianmianci* has multiple written forms in terms of morphology. This paper analyzes the phenomenon of variable forms and its causes in the development of *Lianmianci*, and puts forward corresponding standardization suggestions for the use of *Lianmianci* forms in modern Chinese.

Keywords: *Lianmianci*, Morphological characteristics, Vocabulary standardization, Chinese vocabulary.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese characters are writing symbols that record the Chinese language. “One character · one syllable · one meaning (concept)”– the “character” serves as the basic structural unit of the Chinese language. However, disyllabic non-morphemic words are a special category within the Chinese vocabulary system, characterized by “two characters · two syllables · one concept”, and are regarded as a “branch” [1].

Lianmianci refer to monomorphemic disyllabic words whose two syllables are connected to form an inseparable meaning, featuring unique phonological and semantic characteristics. This has long been one of the key focuses in academic research. Notably, *Lianmianci* commonly exhibit the phenomenon of polymorphism (i.e., multiple graphical forms for the same word), such as *kedou* (蝌蚪, “tadpole”) vs. *kedou* (科斗, alternative form), *furong* (芙蓉, “hibiscus”) vs. *furong* (夫容, alternative form), and *xiaoyao* (逍遥, “carefree”) vs. *xiangyang* (相羊, ancient variant). While this diversity is a distinctive feature of *Lianmianci*, it also poses challenges for learning, memorization, and linguistic standardization. Therefore, this paper, based on an investigation of the polymorphic phenomena of *Lianmianci* and an analysis of their

causes, proposes standardization suggestions for regulating such graphical variations.

2. BASIC CONCEPTS AND MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LIANMIANCI

2.1 Definition of *Lianmianci*

A correct understanding of *Lianmianci* serves as the foundation and prerequisite for researching related issues. As a special type of disyllabic monomorphemic words in the history of Chinese vocabulary, *Lianmianci* consist of two Chinese characters representing two syllables that are closely connected, jointly expressing a complete and inseparable meaning. That is, the meaning of *Lianmianci* is holistic—it is not simply the sum of the meanings of individual characters but forms a new, independent meaning through the collaborative function of the two syllables. Grammatically speaking, the two characters of *Lianmianci* are typically used as a whole in sentences, serving as subjects, objects, attributives, etc., but cannot be split or analyzed internally like compound words. Take “*meigui*” (玫瑰) as an example, it is a noun denoting the general term for

flowers of the *Rosa* genus in the *Rosaceae* family. In a sentence, it functions as a whole as a subject or object, however, if *mei* (玫) and *gui* (瑰) are separated, *mei* (玫) alone has no practical meaning and cannot be used independently, and the same applies to *gui* (瑰). Another example is the *Lianmianci youyu* (犹豫): when *you* (犹) and *yu* (豫) are separated, they each lose the holistic meaning of “hesitation”, and only as a whole can they accurately convey the state of indecision. *Lianmianci* have multiple designations, including *Lianyu* (连语), *Lianmianzi* (联绵字), *Lianmianzi* (联绵字), *Pianzi* (骈字), *Pianci* (骈词), *Erwen Yiming* (二文一命), *Lianyu* (连语), *Lianyu* (连语), *Lianyu* (联语), *Shuangsheng Dieyun Zi* (双声叠韵字), *Lianmian Ci* (联绵词), etc. These different names actually reflect historical understandings of this special lexical phenomenon from various perspectives. Today, *Lianmian Ci* (联绵词) is the preferred term.

Due to the emphasis on pronunciation over form in *Lianmianci*, they exhibit distinct morphological characteristics compared to other word types:

First, in terms of syllabic composition, all *Lianmianci* are disyllabic monomorphemic words. The two Chinese characters recording a *Lianmianci* only represent syllables—individually, they denote sound rather than meaning, and together they express a complete meaning that cannot be interpreted in parts. For example, words like *panghuang* (彷徨, “wandering”), *xiaoyao* (逍遥, “carefree”), *furong* (芙蓉, “hibiscus”), and *kedou* (蝌蚪, “tadpole”) lose their original meaning when split. This disyllabic structure is the most fundamental morphological feature of *Lianmianci*.

Secondly, there is a clear phonetic correlation between the characters of *Lianmianci*, primarily manifested as alliteration, assonance, or reduplication. Their two syllables show phonetic connections, falling into types such as alliterative, assonant, or neither. Alliterative *Lianmianci*, such as *luli* (陆离, “colorful”) and *zhizhu* (蜘蛛, “spider”), have identical initial consonants in their two syllables. Assonant *Lianmianci* (e.g., *canlan* 灿烂, “brilliant”; *hulu* 葫芦, “gourd”) share the same vowel rhyme. Assonant *Lianmianci*, such as *cànlàn* (灿烂, “brilliant”) and *húlu* (葫芦, “gourd”), share the same vowel rhyme in their syllables. Words that are both alliterative and assonant, like *zhanzhun* (辗转, “tossing and turning”) and *kan han* (颀颀, “gaunt”), have identical initial consonants and vowel rhymes. Non-alliterative and non-asonant *Lianmianci*, such as *haodang* (浩荡, “magnificent”)

and *pangtuo* (滂沱, “torrential”), have neither matching initial consonants nor vowel rhymes.

Furthermore, *Lianmianci* show great flexibility in character selection, with polymorphism being a common phenomenon. There is no direct correspondence between their graphical forms and semantics; characters merely serve as phonetic symbols. Many *Lianmianci* have multiple written forms. Take *youyu* (犹豫, “hesitation”) as an example: the individual meanings of *you* (犹) and *yu* (豫) have no direct relation to the word’s holistic meaning. “You” was historically explained as an animal good at climbing trees, while “yu” has multiple meanings (e.g., “安乐” peace, “预先” pre-). These individual meanings cannot explain *youyu*. The characters are chosen solely to record pronunciation, with no inherent link to “hesitation”. Similarly, *youyu* (犹豫, “hesitation”) also appears as “犹与” “犹预” “由豫” “犹夷” “由夷”—these variants further confirm that *Lianmianci* forms are phonetic markers, not semantic carriers.

Additionally, from a historical perspective, *Lianmianci* forms exhibit dual characteristics of stability and variability. On one hand, words like *yaotiao* (窈窕, “graceful”) and *pangbo* (磅礴, “magnificent”) have remained graphically unchanged; on the other, some have evolved, such as “逶迤” (winding), which was historically written as “委佗”. This variability complicates standardization.

Lianmianci have no fixed forms—their characters change with phonetic shifts—and the number of such words with identical or similar sounds and meanings is enormous. Xu Zhenbang’s statistics [2] show that among approximately 6,641 *Lianmianci* (excluding onomatopoeia, reduplicatives, and loanwords), 4,077 are standard forms, with 2,564 variants—1,156 standard forms have variants, accounting for 38.6% of the total. While these variants were necessary in ancient Chinese to enrich linguistic expressions and reflect historical development, their complexity in modern Chinese causes difficulties in reading, writing, and comprehension, underscoring the need for standardization.

3. CAUSES OF THE POLYMORPHIC PHENOMENON IN LIANMIANCI FORMS

The polymorphism of *Lianmianci* is extremely common in the development of the Chinese language. From a linguistic history perspective,

pufu “匍匐” (crawl) has variants like 匍伏, 扶服, 扶伏, 蒲伏, 蒲服, etc., while *kedou* “蝌蚪” (tadpole) appears as 蝌斗, 蜃蚪, 科斗, 乾蚪, 圪蚪, 虵斗, etc. The same *Lianmianci* may take different forms in various documents, reflecting its evolution and variation in historical transmission. Although graphically altered, their core phonetic and semantic features remain unchanged. Ancient books record the most variants: for example, *weiyi* “逶迤” (winding) has 83 forms, *cuiwei* “崔嵬” (lofty) 30, *banlan* “斑斓” (colorful) 30, and *fangfu* “仿佛” (seem) 19—all sharing similar sounds and meanings but differing in writings, a distinct feature of Chinese. The causes of this phenomenon are as follows:

First, the essential feature of *Lianmianci*, “emphasis on sound over form”, enables polymorphic variation.

Since there is a weak link between their graphical forms and meanings, people focus more on pronunciation than script. Thus, variant writings are normal, and long-term historical accumulation has led to the coexistence of multiple forms for the same word. Phonological evolution is also a key factor: Chinese pronunciation has undergone significant changes in initials, finals, and tones over history. Ancient pronunciations of some *Lianmianci* differed from modern ones, leading to corresponding graphic changes. For instance, “匍匐” was an alliterative *Lianmianci* in ancient times, but its initial consonant pronunciation diverged from modern Chinese, possibly causing variants like “扶服” and “扶伏”.

Secondly, graphic variation arises from misusing homophones or near-homophones.

As *Lianmianci* prioritize phonetic representation, users often choose characters based on auditory impression—e.g., writing “囫圇” (whole) as “胡伦”, or “疙瘩” (lump) as “疙搭”. Though such misuses do not hinder comprehension, they disrupt lexical standardization to some extent.

Thirdly, regional variants emerge under dialectal influence.

Certain *Lianmianci* develop different forms in distinct dialect areas; for example, the Mandarin “邋遢” (sloppy) is often written as “甩沓” in Cantonese, potentially causing communication barriers across dialects. China’s vast territory and diverse dialects lead to phonetic, lexical, and grammatical differences. Take “馄饨” (dumpling soup): it is written as “云吞” in some dialects—though

phonetically and graphically distinct, both refer to the same food. Dialectal phonetics affect *Lianmianci* pronunciation, prompting graphic changes. When initials or finals in dialects differ from Mandarin, people use different characters to accurately record these words.

Fourthly, writing habits significantly influence *Lianmianci* forms.

Ancient writing tools and materials, along with individual calligraphic styles, could cause graphic discrepancies. Writers might simplify or alter characters for convenience, leading to variants—e.g., simplifying strokes or changing components. This also contributes to polymorphism.

In summary, the polymorphism of *Lianmianci* results from the interplay of phonological evolution, dialectal differences, writing habits, and other factors. Exploring these causes helps us better understand the laws of graphic evolution and cultural connotations of *Lianmianci*. However, this phenomenon poses challenges for learning and teaching—especially in teaching Chinese as a second language, where it substantially increases students’ memorization burden—highlighting the necessity of standardizing *Lianmianci* forms.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR STANDARDIZING LIANMIANCI FORMS

The standardization of *Lianmianci* forms refers to selecting one form as the universal variant from multiple graphical representations of the same word, which significantly reduces the quantity, easing the burden of recognition, memorization, and confusion in usage. Standardization can be approached from the following aspects:

4.1 Abolishing Variant Forms and Merging Homophones

For *Lianmianci* with identical pronunciation and meaning but slightly different forms (e.g., “飘摇” and “飘飘”), merge them into a single standard form. Other examples include “蛤蟆” vs. “蛤蟆”, “糊涂” vs. “胡涂”, etc.

4.2 Adopting the Principle of Popular Usage to Select Widely Recognized Forms

The “popular usage” principle refers to the usage norms long-formed and widely accepted by

the public. In writing, this is typically reflected in using simplified characters and avoiding obscure or rare characters. For instance, *cuiwei* “崔嵬” has 30 variants like “崔巍”, “崔隄”, “崔巖”, but “崔嵬” is recommended due to its historically higher usage frequency, wider acceptance, and popularity.

4.3 Simplifying Components to Streamline Forms

As ancient lexical forms, *Lianmianci* often have complex structures involving simplified-complex character and ancient-modern character issues. Standardized lists often replace complex radicals with simpler ones (often homophonic or near-homophonic, synonymous or near-synonymous), such as “萝卜” (luobo) replacing “蘿蔔” (luobo), where “卜” is the simplified form with fewer strokes. Other examples include “缤纷” vs. “繽紛”, “蜘蛛” vs. “蠍蟲”, “仿佛” vs. “髣髴”.

4.4 Prioritizing Graphically Motivated Forms

Although *Lianmianci* are disyllabic monomorphemic words with characters unrelated to meaning, the ideographic nature of Chinese characters is still evident. Chinese is a logophonetic writing system, so monosyllabic words usually have both phonetic and semantic components. For purely phonetic words, characters may still use semantic radicals to indicate meaning categories—e.g., “枇杷” (loquat) with “木” (tree radical), “馥郁” (fragrant) with “香” (fragrance radical), “霖霖” (drizzle) with “雨” (rain radical), “滂沛” (torrential) with “氵” (water radical), “悵悵” (gloomy) with “忄” (heart radical), “琳琅” (jewels) with “玉” (jade radical). When standardizing, forms with radicals related to the word’s meaning and consistent structural patterns are preferred, as they align with Chinese cognitive habits (e.g., 徘徊, 彷徨, 趑趄, 蝌蚪, 蛤蟆, 踟蹰, 崔嵬, 逶迤, 芙蓉).

Some *Lianmianci* originally lacked semantic radicals, but later users added relevant radicals to clarify meaning—for example, “仓兄” became “怆怆” (with “忄” radical for mental states), and “夫容” became “芙蓉” (with “艹” radical for plants). This trend of adding semantic components to indicate meaning categories, along with standardized structures and simplified strokes, represents a key direction for *Lianmianci* standardization in modern Chinese.

5. CONCLUSION

As a unique category in Chinese vocabulary, *Lianmianci* are characterized by disyllabic structures, strong phonetic correlation, and flexible graphic selection. The coexistence of variant forms primarily stems from their sound-over-form nature and historical accumulation. Establishing selection criteria for *Lianmianci* can effectively promote standardization, which is crucial for maintaining the purity of the Chinese language and fostering its healthy development—an area deserving continuous attention and research from linguists.

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