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THE VISUALISATION OF TIME IN ORAL LANGUAGE - WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ENGLISH AND CHINESE

RESUME

Des savants de différentes branches des sciences humaines, Piaget, Porzig et beaucoup d'autres, ont observé que l'interprétation et la représentation du temps dans les langues passent nécessairement par un stade spatial, donc visuel. Le présent article fournit de nombreux faits et arguments basés sur des données venant de l'anglais et du chinois, à la fois classiques et contemporains, à l'appui des prémisses mentionnées.
I. As a general rule, notions of time are represented in oral language by words of spatio-visual origin. The very word time is an example of this rule: it comes from the Latin tempus, itself derived from the Greek temno meaning 'to cut, cut out, delimit', a physical and visual act. The purpose of this study is to examine this phenomenon of the visualization of time such as it may be observed in various languages(1). Our first demonstration of this phenomenon will use words meaning immediate in several languages, beginning with the Chinese(2). In classical Chinese, at least starting with the 2nd Century B.C., the notion immediate was represented by the word 吉 that today is pronounced as ji (3). But the first meaning of this word in the 5th Century B.C. was 'to approach a place or an object'; it was found in expressions such as 吉位 ji-wei (approach-throne) 'to come to the throne', 吉事 ji-shi (approach-business) 'to get down to the task', 吉觀/吉觀 ruo-ji.ruo-li (as-approach-as-recede) 'to seem to approach and recede at the same time' (used, for e.g., to express a lukewarm or ambiguous relationship) and many other expressions as well(4). Although this word 吉 continues to be used in the temporal sense today, notably in the idiomatic expression 吉去 吉回 ji-qu-ji-hui (immediately-go-immediately-return) 'no sooner gone than returned' and 吉説 吉吉 ji-shuo-ji-gan (immediately-say-immediately-do) 'no sooner said than done', the word that most commonly expresses the notion of immediate today is 马上 ma-shang (horse-on top), literally 'on horseback', which made its appearance in the 10th Century. The temporal meaning of this word, which is of a non-visual nature, is clearly derived from a syntagm signifying an action taking place in space. It is the image of a knight or a traveller on the point of departure that gave rise to the meaning of immediate.

(1) This study is part of my research program on the representation of non-visual notions in terms of spatio-visual one. The visualization is one of the illustrations of the phenomenon in language.

(2) The word immediate in italic capitals only represents the notion in no matter what form it might appear in different languages. Since this notion might materialize in various manners within a same language, for example in French, immédiat/immédiatement, sur le champ, tout de suite, we will therefore not take into account those syntactic constraints caused by surface forms of this notion.

(3) In order not to complicate the typing of this article, we will not indicate the tones of the Chinese and Vietnamese words quoted here.

(4) As a matter of fact the spatio-visual meaning of this word is reflected in its ancient form (14th Century B.C.): , showing a man on the right facing a pot on the left.