

Instrumentality: The Core Meaning of the Coverb *Yi* 以 in Classical Chinese

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Yi 以 is one of the most important and commonly used function words in Classical Chinese, and many researchers (e.g. Hsueh 1997, Pulleyblank 1995, Sun 1991, Wu 1994 and Wu 1997) have contributed to the discussion on *yi*'s meanings and functions. The main issues in the current understanding of *yi* include its verb and coverb usages. Both usages have been thought to exhibit a range of meanings, and *yi* has been thought to be able to occur flexibly either before or after a verb phrase. In addition, *yi* is also thought to be a conjunction indicating the reason, purpose or result of an action. This study proposes that the verb *yi* fundamentally indicates instrumentality, and that the coverb *yi*, which is derived from the verb *yi*, still retains that fundamental notion of instrumentality. The notion of instrumentality has been extended in *yi*'s coverb usage to indicate the means or reason by which an action occurs, or the time which an action occurs. Moreover, I will also argue that the *yi* phrase, when it occurs before a verb phrase, functions syntactically as a modifier to the verb phrase. When the *yi* phrase occurs after another verb phrase, however, the semantic emphasis has been deliberately put on the *yi* phrase, which then serves as the nucleus of the predicate. Thus, different word order of the *yi* phrase actually results in different semantic implications and syntactic functions. This will be illustrated with the phrases 以羊易之 and 易之以羊, in which the position of the *yi* phrase results in different semantic meanings and different syntactic functions.

1. The Instrumental Coverb *Yi* 以

Yi 以 is one of the most important and commonly used function words in Classical Chinese, and many scholars have contributed to the discussion on *yi*'s meanings and functions. The main issues in the current understanding of *yi* include its verb and coverb usages. Both usages have been thought to exhibit a range of meanings, and *yi* has been thought to be able to occur flexibly either before or after a verb phrase. In addition, *yi* is also thought to be a conjunction indicating the reason, purpose or result of an action. Intriguing and complex, these issues still attract the attention of many scholars. Recently, Sun (1991), Wu (1994, 1997), and Hsueh (1997) have attempted to find a more appropriate interpretation for the *yi* phrases through a better understanding of the basic nature of the word *yi*. In this study, I will address several of the issues surrounding *yi*.

After a summary and discussion of previous studies on *yi*, I will move on to my own assessment.

1.1. The Word *Yi* 以

Beginning with the synonym strategies of the traditional Chinese approach to defining a word, *yi* as a verb and coverb has been thought to carry various meanings and be synonymous with several other words. Most modern scholars follow a similar approach of simply listing the various meanings of *yi*. However, this is neither a systematic nor satisfactory approach. If we admit the various usages come from one morpheme, we should be able to determine the fundamental property of that morpheme and then trace its extensions to include different meanings. Xie and Lan (1987) thoroughly investigate *yi* and offer some plausible explanations as to its origins and development of usage. Their contributions should be appreciated. Wu (1994) also provides us with some insights. In what follows, after consulting with these sources, I will offer my assessment on *yi*.

1.2. *Yi* 以 as a Verb

As a transitive verb, the basic meaning of the word *yi* is 'to use, to take'. This meaning is naturally extended to 'to use or take something as the basis for something else'. The first set of examples below illustrates the basic meaning of *yi* as a full verb.

(1) 桓公九合諸侯，不以兵車；管仲之力也。（論語，憲問）

huangong jiu he zhuhou, bu yi bing che; guanzhong zhi li ye

NAME-nine-assemble-feudal lord, NEG-use-soldier-carriage; NAME-POSS-effort-PAR
'It was Guanzhong's doing that Duke Huan was able to assemble the feudal lords nine times without using force.'

(2) 哀公問社於宰我。宰我對曰，「夏后氏以松，殷人以柏，周人以栗，

曰，使民戰栗。」（論語，八佾）

aigong wen she yu zaiwo. zaiwo dui yue, xiahoushi yi song, yin ren yi bo, zhou ren yi li, yue, shi min zhanli

NAME-ask-altar-be at-NAME. NAME-reply-say, NAME-use-pine, NAME-people-use-cedar, NAME-people-use-chestnut, say-make-common people-tremble

'Duke Ai asked Zai Wo about the altar to the god of earth. Zai Wo replied, 'The Xia used the pine, the Yin used the cedar, and the men of Zhou used the chestnut (li), saying that it made the common people tremble (li).'

The next set of examples illustrates that, from its fundamental meaning, *yi* has been extended to mean 'to use or take something as the basis for something else'. This

extended meaning, depending on the context, can be translated into English in various ways, as we shall see below.

(A) "to take it to be that, to think,."

(3) 左右以君賤之也, 食以草具。(戰國策, 齊策)

zuoyou yi jun jian zhi ye, si yi caojū

aide-think-lord-low-him-PAR, feed-use-lowly fare

'The top aides thought that the lord treated him as lowly; (they) used lowly fare to feed him.'

(4) 老臣以媼為長安君計短也。(戰國策, 趙策)

lao chen yi ao wei changan jun ji duan ye

old-servant-think-old lady-for-NAME-lord-plan-short-PAR

'This old servant thinks that the way the elder lady plans for Lord Changan is insufficient.'

(5) 吾以女為死矣! (論語, 先進)

wu yi ru wei si yi

I-think-you-become-die-PAR

'I thought you had met your death.'

(B) "take something as the means", "rely on something". For example,

(6) 以一人之力, 則后稷不足。(韓非子, 喻老)

yi yi ren zhi li, ze houji bu zu

use-one-person-POSS-power, CONJ-NAME-NEG-sufficient

'(If) by means of the strength of one person, (then even) Houji is not sufficient.'

(C) "take something as basis for judgement." For example,

(7) 以位, 則子君也, 我臣也。(孟子, 萬章下)

yi wei, ze zi jun ye, wo chen ye

use-rank, CONJ-you-ruler, I-subject-PAR

'On the basis of rank, you are the ruler and I am the subject.'

As shown above, *yi* is recognized as a transitive verb whose fundamental meaning is 'to use, to take'. It also has a naturally extended meaning of 'to use or take something as the basis for something else'. Given these fundamental meanings, I would like to suggest

that "instrumentality" is the fundamental semantic meaning of the verb *yi*. *Yi* as a verb represents "instrumentality", that is, "to engage (somebody or something) as an instrument."

2. *Yi* 以 as a Coverb

The *yi*+NP+VP pattern presents a well-known word order issue, namely the flexibility of the *yi* phrase's occurrence either before or after the verb phrase. The general pattern for the coverbal *yi* phrase is *yi*+NP+VP. However, *yi* can also occur between two VPs in the pattern VP+*yi*+VP. For example,

晉侯復假道於虞以伐虢。(左傳, 僖公5)

Jinhou fu jia dao yu yu yi fa guo

NAME marquis-again-borrow-path-be at-NAME-in order to-attack-NAME

'The marquis of Jin once again asked for permission to pass through Yu in order to attack Guo.'

In this section I will focus on coverbal *yi* phrases in which the object of *yi* is a NP (*yi*+NP+VP). The VP+*yi*+VP pattern, which is involved with the important notion of Verb Complement, still needs further discussion and investigation.

Yi's coverb usage is extended from its use as a verb. As a coverb *yi* indicates that its following noun is a tool or means for the action to occur. The object of *yi* can be a concrete entity or an abstract concept. For instance,

(8) 許子以釜甗爨, 以鐵耕乎。(孟子, 滕文公上)

xuzi yi fu zeng cuan, yi tie geng hu

NAME-using-iron pot-earthenware-cook, using-metal-plough-PAR

'Does Xuzi cook using an iron pot and an earthenware steamer and plough using iron implements?'

(9) 儒以文亂法, 俠以武犯禁。(韓非子, 五蠹)

ru yi wen luan fa, xia yi wu fan jin

scholar-using-writing-disturb-law, knight-using-force-against-regulation

'The scholars disturb the law using their writings, while the knights flout the regulations using force.'

Yi as a coverb can also provide the reason for the following action. For example,

(10) 梁由靡御韓簡, 虢射為右, 輅秦伯, 將止之。鄭以救公誤之, 遂失秦伯。

(左傳, 僖公15)

liangyoumi yu hanjian, guoyi wei you, lu qin bo, jiang zhi zhi. zheng yi jiu gong wu zhi, sui shi qin bo

NAME-driver-NAME, NAME-serve as-right, rail-NAME-earl, about to-capture-him, NAME-because-rescue-marquis-delay-it, therefore-lost-NAME-earl

'Han Jian, driven by Liang You-mi, and having Guo Yi on his right, met the earl of Qin, and was about to capture him. (However,) because (Qing) zheng (sent Han Jian) to rescue the marquis (of Jin), therefore, (Han Jian) lost (the chance to capture) the Earl of Qin.'

(11) 君子不以言舉人; 不以人廢言。(論語, 衛靈公)

junzi bu yi yan ju ren; bu yi ren fei yan

gentleman-NEG-because-word-recommend-person; NEG-because-person-dismiss-word

'The gentleman does not recommend a man because of what he says, nor does he dismiss what is said because of the speaker's identity.'

It has been commonly accepted that the coverbal meanings of *yi* are quite varied. For example, Pulleyblank (1995:47-48) points out that the coverb *yi* may also be used to indicate the time of an action or the basis for a judgement as follows. (Examples and translations are from Pulleyblank 1995:48)

(12) 以五十步笑百步則何如? (孟子, 梁惠王上)

yi wu shi bu xiao bai bu ze heru

because-five-ten-step-laugh-hundred-step-CONJ-how

'If because of [only running] fifty paces they laughed at [those who ran] one hundred paces, how would it be?'

(13) 斧斤以時入山林。(孟子, 梁惠王上)

fujin yi shi ru shan lin

axe-use-season-enter-mountain-woods

'If axes enter the hills and woods at the proper season'...

(14) 以位,則子君也,我臣也。(孟子, 萬章下)

yi wei, ze zi jun ye, wo chen ye

use-rank, CONJ-you-ruler-PAR, I-subject-PAR

"On the basis of rank, you are the ruler and I am the subject."

Rather than simply stating that the coverb *yi* carries various meanings, I believe that the meanings of the coverb *yi*, since it is derived from the verb *yi*, should still retain the fundamental notion of "instrumentality". The notion of instrumentality has been extended in *yi*'s coverb usage to indicate the means or instrument by which an action is

performed. In other words, the *yi* phrase should be recognized as the means or basis for some action.

In this way, I conclude that semantically, the *yi* phrase indicates instrumentality, which is understood as the means, reason or time for an action to be performed. Syntactically, the *yi* phrase (*yi* +NP), when it occurs before a verb phrase functions as a modifier to the verb phrase.

3. The Word Order of the *Yi* 以 Phrases

The word order issue of *yi* phrases has long been noticed. In general, previous scholars hold that, syntactically, the *yi* phrase can occur either before or after a verb phrase. When it occurs before a verb phrase, it serves as an adverbial to modify the verb phrase. When it occurs after a verb phrase, it is a complement. Thus the common view is that no matter where the *yi* phrase occurs, it always serves as a secondary consideration, a modifier for another verb phrase. Actually, the issues surrounding the word order of the *yi* phrase are much more complex than that, and they deserve a closer look.

The issue of the *yi* phrase occurring after a verb phrase being mistakenly called a complement by many grammarians has been argued and rectified by Wu (1994, 1997) and Hsueh (1997). Rather than accept that the different word order of *yi* phrases makes no difference, Wu (1994, 1997) has illustrated that the different word order of the *yi* phrase actually results in different semantic implications and syntactic functions. Namely, when the *yi* phrase occurs before a verb phrase, it is a modifier and *yi* is a coverb. When it comes after a verb phrase, however, the semantic emphasis has been deliberately put on the *yi* phrase. Therefore, *yi* is a verb serving as the nucleus of the predicate, while the preceding verb phrase is an adverbial modifier. Let's elaborate the point. Take a look at the following passage from Mencius.

(15) 吾何愛一牛？即不忍其觳觫，若無罪而就死地，故以羊易之也。 ...

我非愛其財而易之以羊也。（孟子，梁惠王上）

wu he ai yi niu? ji bu ren qi husu, ruo wu zui er jiu si di, gu yi yang yi zhi ye....

wo fei ai qi cai er yi zhi yi yang ye

I-how-love-one-ox? simply-NEG-bear-POSS-shrink, like-NEG-guilty-CONJ-go-death-place, therefore-with-goat-change-it-PAR...I-NEG-love-POSS-money-CONJ-change-it-use-goat-PAR

'Why should I be so miserly as to grudge the use of an ox? It was simply because I could not bear to see it shrink with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution, that I replaced it with a goat . . . It is not true that I used a goat to replace it because I grudged the expense.'

This passage has been the favorite example for scholars to cite when addressing the word order issue of *yi* phrases. It contains two possible word orders for *yi* phrases: 以羊易之 and 易之以羊 within the same passage. Previous scholars commenting on this passage, including Wang Li (1981: 451), Lu Guoyao (1992), and Sun (1991) all hold that the *yi* phrase, 以羊, serves as an adverbial phrase modifying the verb phrase 易之 when it occurs before it, and that it serves as a complement to the main verb phrase when it occurs after it. However, when I look at these two contrasting sentences more carefully and take the special characteristics of CC and its semantic implications into consideration, there remain some questions. First of all, since Chinese is a non-inflectional language, the word order principle, namely the modifier-modified pattern, is very crucial. How could a phrase which occurs in a different position, in this case involving all the same words, cause no difference? Shouldn't there be some different semantic implication and syntactic function? Second, if we treat the *yi* phrase as a complement in 易之以羊, the adverbial phrase occurs after the focus, contradicting the modifier - modified word order principle. Third, after re-examining the passage, we find that the so-called complement *yi* phrase is in fact receiving the most emphasis. How could the so-called complement bear the most emphasized information? These questions should at least motivate us to re-investigate the real nature of the *yi* phrases.

After a close study of the *yi* phrases, we claim that when the *yi* phrase occurs before a verb phrase, it is the modifier. When it occurs after a verb phrase, the semantic emphasis has been deliberately put on the *yi* phrase and hence the *yi* phrase becomes the nucleus with the verb phrase as an adverbial phrase to modify it. The following discussion illustrates why this is so.

First, in a non-inflectional language such as Chinese, different word order should result in different semantic implication and syntactic function. Note that some scholars seem to sense this fact. For example, Norman (1988:94) wrote:

Clauses formed with *yi* may either precede or follow the verb; the position after the verb generally focuses attention on the means or instrument, while the position before the verb emphasizes the verb somewhat more.

Pulleyblank (1995: 47) agrees that the emphasis is on the *yi* phrase when it occurs after another verb phrase. He states that the contrasting position of the *yi* phrase in 以戈逐子犯 versus 殺人以挺, differs only in the main focus of attention, which falls on the last verb in the series. While both Norman and Pulleyblank sense that different word order can result in different semantic emphasis, they haven't fully recognized its implications.

An entirely different explanation is suggested by Wu (1994, 1997) and Hsueh (1997). Hsueh (1997:33) points out that "for logical and consistent syntactic theorization, the difference in word order is of utmost importance, no matter how subtle may be the resulting semantic difference." Therefore, I believe that the different word order of the *yi* phrase should result in different semantic meaning and syntactic function.

Second, in this passage the different semantic implication in the sentences 以羊易之 and 易之以羊 is clear. Consider why King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 says *yi yang yi zhi* first, and then *yi zhi yi yang* later. The first clause *yi yang yi zhi* comes after the King says that he could not bear the ox's trembling. Thus, with the first clause he emphasized the replacement of the ox, the fact that the ox was not to be sacrificed. The animal with which the ox was replaced is only a secondary consideration at this point in the discourse. However, the second clause *yi zhi yi yang* comes after a clause in which the King stated that he was not stingy over the worth of an ox. This clause is connected to *yi zhi yi yang* by the conjunction *er* 而. According to the nature of *er* 而 (Hsueh 1991), the focus is on the second clause, *yi zhi yi yang*. In this clause, the emphasis is definitely on the goat, because in this section King Xuan of Qi was emphasizing what the ox was replaced with, rather than the simple act of sparing the ox. If we treat the sentences with different word order as having the same meaning, then the emphasis of the King will not be properly explained.

Finally, our claim that the *yi* phrase occurring after the verb phrase is the nucleus of the predicate is in complete accordance with the general rule of word order in Chinese, namely, modifier precedes the modified. Therefore the semantic meaning and syntactic function of these two sentences can be seen below.

(15a) 以 羊 易 之
 (Adverbial phrase: modifier) (Verbal phrase: Nucleus)
 'replace it with a lamb'

(15b) 易 之 以 羊
 (Adverbial phrase: modifier) (Verbal phrase: Nucleus)
 'use a lamb to replace it'

Moreover, we would like to reiterate that the nucleus *yi* phrase does not occur without limitation. It only occurs in the situation in which the object of *yi* is a noun. The following are some examples in which the *yi* phrase is functioning as the semantic focus, the nucleus in the predicate.

(16) 擊之以戈。(左傳, 昭公元年)

ji zhi yi ge

hit-him-use-halberd

'Use the halberd to hit him.'

(17) 道之以政, 齊之以刑, 民免而無恥; 道之以德, 齊之以禮, 有恥且格。(論語, 為政)

dao zhi yi zheng, qi zhi yi xing, min mian er wu chi; dao zhi yi de, qi zhi yi li, you chi qie ge

guide-them-use-edict, neat-them-use-punishment, common people-stay away-CONJ-NEG-shame; guide-them-use-virtue, neat-them-use-rite, have-shame-CONJ-reform

'Use edicts to guide them, use punishments to keep them in line, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Use virtue to guide them, use rites to keep them in line, and they will have a sense of shame and reform themselves.'

(18) 樹之以桑。(孟子, 梁惠王上)

shu zhi yi sang

plant-it-use-mulberry tree

'Use mulberry trees to plant it.'

In conclusion, our argument is based on the belief that syntactic change should result in a change in meaning. For further support we noted the principle of word order in Classical Chinese, and the tendency in the language to have the logical predicate located in the center of the grammatical predicate. (Cf. Chao 1968:78-80)

4. Concluding Remarks

In this study, I have addressed several of the issues surrounding the coverb *yi* 以. Rather than admitting that *yi* carries various meaning, I have provided some arguments to suggest that the core meaning of the coverb *yi* is “instrumentality”. This meaning comes naturally from its verb usage “to use, to take” and extends to its instrumentality coverb usage. That is, *yi* is used “to engage (somebody or something) as an instrument.”

Moreover, this study indicates that different word order of *yi* phrases actually results in different semantic implications and syntactic functions. This is completely in accordance with the general word order principles of Chinese language. That is, when the *yi* phrase occurs before a verb phrase, it is a modifier and *yi* is a coverb. When it comes after a verb phrase, the semantic emphasis has been deliberately put on the *yi* phrase as illustrated in the two phrases: 以羊易之 and 易之以羊. Finally, this study hopes to provide better understanding of the core meaning of the coverb *yi* to help us have a chance to better understand the Classical Chinese texts.

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