

Introduction

General Context

As presently used in Modern Standard Chinese, the key normative term, *yi* 義, can be translated as “word-meaning.” *Yi* 義 is not, however, employed to signify “word-meaning” in the wide range of texts from Early China that form the sources for this book, even in the first-century *Shuowen Jiezi*, arguably the first “dictionary” to appear in China. My task in *The Emergence of Word-Meaning in Early China* is not to posit a date when *yi* 義 crossed some imaginary line—when it “emerged,” if you will—to assume the particular remit of lexical meaning but, rather, to ascertain what groundwork was laid and what conditions were met that allowed *yi* 義, at some unspecified time after the first century CE, to accrete that particular usage.¹ What was it about *yi* 義 that, in retrospect, we can identify as predisposing it to be a likely, or perhaps even the apparent, candidate to function as a word’s “meaning”?

Meaning, Sense, or Significance

It is easy to be misled by vocabulary related to meaning. In common English-language parlance, “mean” implies a muddle of different ideas, including: to indicate, inform, suggest, refer, show, reveal, warn, entail, require, prove, imply, be sincere, etc. Hence, as Jeffrey Stout notes, discussions of meaning are confused and confusing.² Meanings are things that float in a linguistic orbit, and it is a matter of

1. Exact dates are not available, but *yi* 義 was being used for lexical meaning as early as the third century. According to Hsu Wen, “The first systematic use of fanqie to notate the sounds is generally attributed to the book *Erya Yinyi* 爾雅音義 [*Pronunciation and Meaning in the Erya*]. This commentary on *Erya*, a thesaurus compiled before 100 B.C., was written by Sun Yan 孫炎 who lived around A.D. 220, near the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty.” Hsu, “First Step toward Phonological Analysis,” 142.

2. Stout, “What Is the Meaning of a Text?” 1–12. For the rise and fall of the heyday of meanings, see Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*

debate whether “meanings of words” are individual entities at all.³ The ontological status of “meanings” thus complicates the task of historicizing the adoption of *yi* 義 for semantic use.

The terms *yi* 義 (as used in early Chinese texts) and “meaning” resemble each other in their breadth of scope: just as *yi* 義 has semantic as well as normative applications, so too “meaning” has semantic and ethical uses.⁴ Historical links between “meaning” and “sense,” however, reveal an important difference from *yi* 義. In ancient Greek, there was no overlap in terms used for “to signify” (*semainein*) and those used for sense perception.⁵ But later Latin applications of a word related to “meaning” extended to uses for perception. That is, the church fathers translated the Greek word *nous* into Latin as *sensus*—a translation made possible by the understanding of sense as both physical and linguistic. In other words, as a consequence of the Latin translation of *nous*, the term *sens* also meant inner sense or “moral sense.”⁶ By contrast, early Chinese texts employ no specific term linking perceptual processing with introspective linguistic or moral cogitation.⁷ The term often translated as “the senses” (*guan* 官) is a metaphor for the important bodily officers, rather than a term used to mean “to sense.”⁸ Absent a term functioning like *sensus*, there is no reason to expect similarities between usage of “sense” or “meaning” and early Chinese uses of *yi* 義.

3. Stampe, “Toward a Grammar of Meaning,” 153–154.

4. Meaning-bearing items include things like utterances, gestures, names, marks, clothing, expressions, dances, plays, films, events, and lives.

5. Simon et al., “Sense/Meaning,” 949. Retrieved from <https://muse-jhu-edu.newman.richmond.edu/chapter/1449331/pdf>.

6. In French, *sens* is also used for direction, as in a current of water, as well as in “the right direction” and “common sense” (which is also used to mean the “right sense.”) So “*le bon sens*” is used to mean “common sense,” but also “the right direction” or the “right way.” Simon et al., 949.

7. In other words, early Chinese texts evince no overarching term like “to sense,” notwithstanding standard translations of *guan* 官. I expand my argument on this point in “Aural and Visual Hierarchies in Texts from Early China,” (forthcoming). For a similar observation, see Mahaut de Barros, *Translation and Metalanguage in Laozi*, 184.

8. Some sensory terminological overlap occurs for “to hear” and “to smell” (*wen* 聞), and for “to see” and “to be apparent” in sound and sight (*jian* 見).

The most detailed discussion of “sensing” in texts from Early China, the *Xunzi*’s “Zhengming” chapter, uses *gan* 感 (another modern term for “to sense”) but only once as “stimulus,” and in the context of glossing *xing* 性 (latent natural dispositions). On *xing* 性 and *qing* 情, see Plaks, “Before the Emergence of Desire,” 324–331.

Dictionaries, Translation, and the Idea of Linguistic Abstractions

Along with unfamiliar approaches to meaning, texts from Early China offer no evidence of study of grammatical constructs, no clear term for “word,” and no explicit discussion of the ontology of semantic objects or abstract objects (such as propositions, properties, and numbers). We cannot even take for granted that early Chinese texts feature a single “folk theory of language.”⁹ The monumental nature of the *Shuowen Jiezi*, the first-century “dictionary of graphic etymology” compiled by Xu Shen, tempts us to mistake it for an accurate reflection of “early Chinese thought.” But it is unlikely that the *Shuowen* embodies or reflects ideas about language belonging to inhabitants the Yellow River valley for the prior half millennium. Despite the rich ethnic diversity and probable presence of bilingualism in Early China, texts that have been taken to predate the first millennium make few references to oral interpretation and scarcely any to translation—activities that might foster new thinking about language. Subsequently, conceptions of language surely changed with increasing textualization and the rising prestige of “writing,” as well as reports of (sketchily understood) alphabetic scripts.

A term for “word-meaning” depends, of course, on a concept of “word.” As a semantic or grammatical feature of language, a “word” is a unit (or value) in a larger system. The system of language is often pictured as a structure or web with no direct connection to events and objects in the world “outside it.”¹⁰ Not so with *ming* 名, a “name,” which paradigmatically points at something visible, say an object or event in the world. One might say a name has a “referent” or a “reference.” Its function differs, then, from that of a “word,” and so the presence of the term *ming* 名 in early Chinese texts does not constitute evidence of a concept of “word.”¹¹ Moreover, even the use of *zi* 字 as the standard term for a minimal unit of writing is insufficient proof of the existence of a concept of “word.” Before the *Shuowen*

9. The dates for specific passages in early texts are generally uncertain. As Martin Kern puts it, “When looking at a text that is traditionally dated to pre-imperial times, it is impossible to separate its original core from the shape and organization it was given by its Han editors. To some extent, all received pre-imperial texts are Han texts.” Kern, “Kongzi as Author in the Han,” 270.

For Chad Hansen’s contrast between a “Chinese folk theory of language” and a “Western folk theory of language,” see Hansen, “Chinese Ideographs and Western Ideas,” 373–399. In a later publication, Hansen clarifies that by “Chinese folk theory” he means framing disputes “around a shared view.” Hansen, “Why Chinese Thought Is Not Individualistic,” 82.

10. See section on “Concepts of Word” (below).

11. The explicit arguments that uses of *ming* 名 in early Chinese texts are not evidence of a concept of word are rare (Moeller, “Chinese Theory of Forms and Names,” and Geaney, “Grounding ‘Language’ in the Senses”).

Jiezi (first century), it remains debatable whether *zi* 字 was understood to mean “word.” But by taking note of graphs’ pronunciations, the *Shuowen* signals that *zi* 字 was understood to mean more than *simply a unit of writing*.¹²

In general, a dictionary facilitates conceptualizing speech as segmented into invariant words whose definitions are their meanings. Typically, a dictionary entails the existence of concepts of “word” and “word-meaning.” A dictionary’s one-to-one word equations are fundamentally decontextualized. But there is nothing inevitable about the decontextualized approach to linguistic thinking that dictionaries facilitate. When we listen to people speaking, we automatically hear what they say, but we have to be trained to “hear away” from them in order to segment speech into words and trained even further to construe those segments as invariant.¹³ Conceptualizing meaning as something that can be abstracted from words involves a kind of mind/body dualism, wherein the sound of the language is its “body” and the meaning is its disembodied soul. As post-phenomenologist Don Ihde puts it, “meanings float above and beyond the embodiment” that presents itself to us.¹⁴

As early as the second millennium BCE, dictionary-making was well entrenched in Mesopotamia, with bilingual word-lists equating terminology in Sumerian and Akkadian. Bilingual lists seem to have fostered the translational habit of matching words as if they were invariant objects rather than embedded within a situational context and directed toward an intended audience.¹⁵ In due course, the Sumer/Akkad word for “lexeme” became conflated with the Platonic “logos,” which functioned

12. Of the various interpretations of the *Shuowen*’s title, Françoise Bottéro’s is particularly compelling. She contends that that for Xu Shen, “*Wen* are graphs and *zi* are graphic representations of spoken words.” Bottéro, “Revisiting the *wen* 文 and the *zi* 字,” 23. The distinction is subtle but important: “the focus of *wen* is on graphology and physical shape of characters” (26). By contrast, *zi* are simply written words. When Xu Shen uses the term *zi*, he is not emphasizing their shape, as he does with the term *wen*. As Bottéro notes, the *Shuowen* describes *wen* in terms of kinds, likeness, and forms (類象形), which point to the patterns of writing, whereas it describes *zi* in terms of sound and form added (形聲相益), which approximates the idea of “word.” She writes, “Adding *sheng* 聲 to *xing* 形 in Xu Shen’s genealogy of writing means assigning pronunciations to graphs” (23).

See chapter 1 for examples pointing to the late standardization of the terminology for “word.”

13. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 153.

14. Ihde, 153. My point here is not that early Chinese thinking about “language” is not “abstract” in the sense of noticing shared traits among many perceptual experiences. Rather, I am saying that its approach to “language” does not strip bits of speech and writing of their individual characteristics to posit ideal entities. See below for discussion of immersed views of language.

15. Andre LeFevre describes these conclusions from Hans Vermeer in LeFevre, “Chinese and Western Thinking on Translation,” 16–24. Vermeer, *Skizzen Zu Einer Geschichte Der Translation*, 1992.

as both grammatical “word” and as “reason,” “principle,” etc. Thus, Mesopotamian developments in lexicography and translation fostered a distinctly abstract framework for conceptualizing speech.

In Chinese history, however, dictionaries were slow to appear (the *Shuowen Jiezi* arguably being the first) and a strong oral component characterized the early history of translation. Earlier “word-books” show that oral practice strongly affected the history of translation. The *Erya* 爾雅, of uncertain date, is often referred to as a dictionary, but a more apt description is “synonymicon.”¹⁶ The *Erya* provides lists of synonyms for certain terms in classical texts. Its taxonomy is organized not phonetically or by “semantic classifiers” but by categories such as plants, fish, and domesticated animals.¹⁷ Its entries gloss terms rather than defining them.¹⁸ For instance, the *Erya* arranges half a dozen terms from classical texts in a row to which is appended a single gloss in the form “X 也”—a formula that implies something like: the members of this list share some semantic connection to this gloss.¹⁹ The formula varies along these lines: “This is called X” or “That which is X, we call Y.” The vocal practice of “calling” (*wei* 謂) implies the use of “names,” not “words”; hence, the items glossed in the *Erya* were likely to have been understood as “names” for things, not as a technical concept of “words.” The *Erya* does not resemble a dictionary insofar as its entries pertain to a particular context (items from a limited set of classics) and glosses names (which *refer* to things) rather than defining words (which have meanings).²⁰

The *Fangyan* 方言 of Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE) has also been called a dictionary, but it too is best understood as something else. As with the *Erya*, the *Fangyan* arranges entries according to non-lexical categories, and it speaks of “calling” things, which again suggests reference rather than word-meaning. Its entries

16. While some scholars date the *Erya* 爾雅 to the third century BCE, Michael Nylan places it after Han Wudi (141–87 BCE), noting, among other factors, that “*erya*” was also used to mean elegant lyrical style. See Nylan, *Yang Xiong*, 120.

17. As William Boltz points out, “semantic classifiers” are not “radicals,” as they are often called, because they are graphic accretions, not graphic roots. Boltz, *Origin and Early Development*, 67–68.

18. As Roy Andrew Miller puts it, “word x is somehow equivalent to word y.” Miller, “*Shih Ming*,” 425.

19. For a more technical explanation of the formula, see Michel Teboul’s application of “linguistic enumeration theory” to the text’s first three sections. Teboul describes the text itself as “a compilation of Chinese characters” that “aims to elucidate them through contrast with other characters which the various commentaries to the Classics show to have related meanings.” Teboul, “Enumeration Structure,” 267. See also Coblin, “*Erh ya* 爾雅,” 94–99; and Von Rosthorn, “*Erh-ya* and Other Synonymicons,” 137–145.

20. Early Chinese texts often note an obligation to name things properly, but it does not account for the development of *yi* 義 as a metalinguistic term, because the minimal units to which metalinguistic uses of *yi* 義 apply are not names (*ming* 名). See chapter 1.

consist of terms from different regions and different eras. The *Fangyan* collects regional speech and, given its inclusion of archaic scripts and obsolete phrases, it is arguably a preliminary foundation for philological study.²¹ Like the *Erya*, it manages to gloss terms without employing anything like a term for “meaning” and, thus, does not appear to be a dictionary.

Nor did word-for-word translations foster an idea of word-meaning. References to translation are extremely rare in Chinese texts dating before the first millennium²² and allusions to oral interpretation of mutually unintelligible speech scant.²³ For instance, some early Chinese texts mention minor functionaries, sometimes called “tongue people,” orally interpreting foreign speech (“reverse tongues”) for the purposes of conveying the ruler’s policies and accepting tribute.²⁴ Although no transcript of such oral interpretations exist, they were probably not “word for word.” Even when efforts were launched to translate Buddhist texts in the second century, those translations were not likely to have been word for word either since the mode of their transmission was oral.²⁵ Not until the fifth century, it appears, did translators of Buddhist texts even attempt to grasp the concept of a “word” in inflected alphabetic languages.²⁶

21. Nylan places Yang’s somewhat puzzling twenty-seven-year commitment to collecting regional speech in the *Fangyan* within the *haogu* (loving antiquity) movement to reform language, which also included his expansion of the *Cang Jie* 倉頡 word list. She notes that the *Fangyan* contains archaic as well as regional terms, and she suggests that Yang might have hoped collecting regional speech would contribute to language reforms, if he believed that it contained clues to more pristine forms of the early language. Nylan, *Yang Xiong*, 123–124.

22. Joseph R. Allen observes, “There is not one mention of ‘translation’ (at least in terms now recognized) in the standard Pre-Han classics (*Shijing*, *Shujing*, *Yijing*) or the early Confucian canon (*Chunqiu*, *Lunyu*, *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*), nor is there any mention in the core Daoist texts (*Zhuangzi*, *Laozi*).” As he points out, the earliest record of translational activity (in the *Shiji*) discusses “translation activity,” does not mention translators, barely mentions translations or interpretations, and treats the matter as of no particular importance. Allen, “Babel Fallacy,” 122, 124.

23. Rejecting the term “dialect,” Victor Mair proposes “topolect” for *fangyan* (方言), regional speech that is not mutually intelligible. Mair “What Is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’?,” 7.

24. The *Liji*’s mention of a group of translators called *xiang* 象 (a term whose uses often imply visual associations), however, might seem to suggest writing rather than voice. But it might be a transcription of a foreign word, as Joseph Allen suggests, following Wolfgang Behr’s approach to a related term. In that case, as Allen puts it, “the standard Chinese word ‘to translate’ (*yi*) itself may be a calque of a northern non-Chinese word.” Allen, “The Babel Fallacy,” 127, and Wolfgang Behr, “‘To Translate’ Is ‘To Exchange,’” 173–209.

25. According to Daniel Boucher, these translations were fundamentally oral/aural. The texts being translated had often been committed to memory. Moreover, records indicate that, even with the scripture at hand, the process entailed oral delivery. Boucher, “Gāndhāri,” 475.

26. Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518). Link, “Earliest Chinese Account,” 282n187.

Concepts of Word, Linguistic Media, and “Sociological Word”

Alphabetic writing contributes to an impression of identity of items across aural and visual linguistic media, which is conducive to the development of a metalinguistic concept of a word-type. Texts from Early China that depict the origin of writing, however, do not suggest any dependence on sound or speech even in the face of the obvious value of script to record speech.²⁷ Instead, writing is traced back to visible things. Writing was assumed to be “non-glottic” in the way that charts, diagrams, or mathematical notation are.²⁸ For example, when the *Laozi* advocates a return to knotting cords, it suggests “writing” not as recorded speech but as something quite different. Early mythology traces the inspiration for writing to visible tracks of birds and animals, rather than (as might seem equally plausible) records of heaven’s commands (*tianming* 天命). This writing—with its mnemonic functions assisting in counting, and its mantic functions suggested by hexagrams—began as something irreducible to a transcript of speech. In this conception, it is the (standardized) graph rather than an invariant word-type that resolves speech ambiguity.²⁹

Yuan Ren Chao has introduced a term into the scholarly discourse that is quite useful for my discussion here: the *sociological word*. As Chao explains it, a “word” in this construct is understood as a unit that “the general nonlinguistic public is conscious of, talks about, has an everyday term for, and is practically concerned with in various ways. It is the kind of thing . . . which a writer is paid for so much per thousand . . . the kind of thing one makes slips of the tongue on, and for the right or wrong use of which one is praised or blamed.”³⁰ A variety of terms in early Chinese texts meet the specifications that Chao sets forth. For instance, *yan* 言 (speech) and *ming* 名 exhibit some of the practical features of a

27. This is noteworthy in light of what scholars have called the threat of “pure phoneticization” that Chinese writing encountered in the late Warring States. William Boltz suggests that, for scholars of the third century BCE, trends that were natural “in a strictly evolutionary sense” would have threatened to collapse the perceived “natural order” toward balancing “graph-sound-sense” (*Origin and Early Development*, 176–177). In my view, the early Chinese habit of framing the world in aural-visual polarities (graph-sound, in this case) might plausibly have posed resistance to desemanticization (loss of semantic properties involved in creating a syllabary or alphabet). Indeed, the prestige of non-glottic writing seems to have functioned as a counter to the importance of speech. But the third item Boltz mentions here, linguistic “sense,” was not evident in the third century BCE. See Geaney, “Grounding ‘Language’ in the Senses,” 267–270.

28. Roy Harris uses the term “non-glottic writing” in *Origin of Writing* and in *Signs of Writing*.

29. For a detailed description of the process of using graphs to resolve ambiguity, see Allen, “I Will Speak,” 189–206.

30. Chao raises this point in connection with arguing that a graph is a sociolinguistic word in modern China. Chao, *Grammar of Spoken Chinese*, 136.

sociological word. In early Chinese texts, the term *yan* 言 functions as meaning speech or utterance, not an abstraction that connects written and spoken tokens. Consider, if you will, the texts' repeated metaphors of *yan* coming out of the mouth, being emitted, being heard, and being listened to, often as explicitly contrasted to writing. As Chinese texts began to pay more attention to the differences between speech and writing, their increasingly frequent contrasts between *yan* and writing continued to depict *yan* as sound-based.³¹ As a term of measurement, "one *yan*" (*yi yan* 一言) is a unit of speech, varying in size from what we might call a "word" to what we might call a "phrase." Prior to the uniform use of *zi* to mean "graph," *yan* was also a means for counting textual units.³² Early Chinese texts often refer to texts as speaking and being heard, which does not counter the understanding of

31. These are a few examples from the first-century *Fayan*.

故言、心聲也，書、心畫也。

Thus, *yan* 言 (speech) is the heartmind's sound, writing is the heartmind's drawing.

Fayan 法言 問神卷第五

吾見諸子之小禮樂也，不見聖人之小禮樂也。

孰有書不由筆，言不由舌？

I have seen the various masters slight the rites and the music, but I have not seen a sage slight the rites and the music.

Who has writings that are not produced by a brush? Or *yan* 言 (speech) that is not produced by a tongue?

For other examples, see the *yan* 言 section of appendix C. All citations to early Chinese texts are to the *CHinese ANcient Texts* (CHANT) 漢達文庫 database unless otherwise noted.

I will supply a tentative date range on first mention of traditional texts, but readers should be aware that the early Chinese texts I examine in this book are "composite texts." Rather than circulating as standardized editions, most were forged fluidly from a range of multiple preexisting documents and oral traditions. Even when there is little doubt that a given text contains early material, assigning a date for when specific parts were written or redacted is generally a matter of debate.

32. The *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* often refer to texts in terms of thousands of *yan*. But when the *Lunheng* distinguishes *yan* from *wen*, the *yan* is spoken.

文吏不通 (一) 經一文，不調師一言；諸生能說百萬章句，非才知百萬人乎？

Scribal officials are not in accord on single *wen* 文 of one Canon, and are not attuned to one bit of *yan* 言 from a teacher. Students, however, are able to explain hundreds of thousands of sections and phrases; is not their talent and knowledge equal to ten thousand people?

Lunheng 論衡 <<效力篇>>

yan 言 as speech but rather reflects that the texts were understood to be recorded sayings that were recited.³³

Ming 名 also correspond to sociological words insofar as they, along with yan, are the focus of lexicons like the *Erya* and the *Fangyan*. Moreover, the *Shiming* 釋名, a lexicon of sound glosses written about 200 CE, focuses on ming rather than zi, at a time when zi had already become the uniform term for “word.” The second-century commentator Zheng Xuan (127–200) was misinformed, however, when he surmised that ming 名 was formerly used to mean what readers of his own time meant by zi. There are only two cases in which uses of ming 名 also refer to graphs, and they seem to be brief experiments at the end of the Warring States period, when interest in standardizing the writing system may have encouraged people to seek a single term for a unit of writing.³⁴

Nothing about early Chinese uses of ming or yan, despite their sharing features of a sociological word, suggest that they were taken to imply the idea of a word as detached or disembodied.

“Immersed” versus “Abstract” Views of Language

For my purposes, two models are especially constructive in helping us identify significant differences in cultural practices and historical shifts in conceptions of language: “immersed” versus “abstract.”³⁵ The immersed model focuses on linguistic

33. The distinction continues when the *Wenxin Diaolong* (fifth or sixth century) treats what is emitted from the mouth as yan 言, whereas what belongs to the brush is literature:

發口為言，屬筆曰翰。

That which is emitted from the mouth is deemed speech, and what is entrusted to the brush is called literary writing.

Wenxin Diaolong 總術第四十四 《文心雕龍》 《卷九》 《總術》

34. Ming 名 seems to have that role in the *Guanzi* (Ch. 10.5 君臣上) and in the *Yili* (Ch. 8 聘禮).

Zheng Xuan's (鄭玄) influential interpretation of ming 名 is as follows. Commenting on the *Zhouli* “Chun guan” (春官), he wrote, “In the past they said ming, now we say zi.” (古曰名，今曰字。). Discussing the *Yili*, he wrote, “Ming are written graphs. Now we call them zi.” (名，書文也。今謂之字。) Buttressing his interpretation of the *Lunyu*'s use of zhengming 正名 to mean rectification of written words, he cited the passage from the *Yili* (mistaking it for the *Liji*) in which he takes ming to be ‘graph,’ noting, “Of old they said ming. These days we say zi.” (古者曰名，今世曰字). Liu Baonan, *Lunyu zhengyi*, vol. 3, 82. For a refutation of Zheng Xuan's interpretation, see Geaney, “Grounding ‘Language’ in the Senses,” 279–280.

35. The titles I give these models are not particularly important. I could, for instance, call the immersed model “engaged,” “embedded,” or “participatory,” as others have done. For similar categories, see Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices*, and Kristeva, *Language* (esp. 50).

practice embedded in its surroundings, thereby foregrounding the relation of language to the world. By contrast, detached conceptions of language emphasize its structure, systematicity, and/or constancy.

An immersed model, in which language is receptive to its environment, pays special attention to the materiality of linguistic activity, viewing it as moved by situational factors and continuous with bodily expression and gestures. Indeed, it treats language itself as a totality of linguistic practices. In an immersed model, there is no clear gap between, on the one hand, the ontological status of speech and names and, on the other, what is spoken about and named. Different versions of immersed models might highlight the bodily processes of speaking and listening or focus on the intersubjectivity of utterances. “Languaging” might be linked to what it talks about and, thus, what speakers believe about the world might be taken to be reflected in phonic similarities.³⁶ Such models might emphasize the rhythm and tone of communication or present naming as a force with physical consequences that are powerful enough to require taboos. From this perspective, in the absence of abstractions like word-types, basic similarities in sounds or signs might seem sufficient to account for communication, but communication failures might attract as much attention as its successes. In sum, language would be rooted within ongoing discourse and occasions of utterance.

An abstract, or detached, conception of language accentuates its formal elements. Examples of this approach might identify and theorize about certain standardized linguistic units that constitute it, such as nouns, verbs, particles, subjects and predicates, meanings, words, sentences, formal definitions, or the distinction between types and tokens. Those elements might be taken to be “obviously natural linguistic kind[s].”³⁷ Moreover, a detached conception of language might posit rules regarding combining units of language or assert the requirements that linguistic communication entails in addition to terms and referents, such as signifieds, concepts, ideas, or word-meanings. An abstract conception might involve viewing language as a differential system or a web in which elements have “values.”³⁸ In other words,

36. Hence I entitled my volume on concepts of language in Early China *Language as Bodily Practice in Early China*. Julie Tetel Andresen’s use of the term “languaging” in *Linguistics and Evolution* is a striking image of language as practice.

37. The phrase is Chad Hansen’s, and he uses it to cast doubt on A. C. Graham’s view that the Neo-Mohists discovered the sentence. Hansen, *Daoist Theory*, 239; Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, 8.

38. For example, in Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*, *langue* is the relatively permanent synchronic aspects of language as a formal system of signs with definitions. He describes it as “speech less speaking” or the whole set of an individual’s linguistic habits that exist within a community of speakers. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 77.

the meaning of every element would be determined through the negation of the meaning of every other element. Such models might conceptualize language not as utterances but as a stable entity whose alterations can be bracketed to produce a more useful long-range perspective.

The distinction between immersed and detached models also applies to views of linguistic meaning. Approached from an abstract or detached perspective, words seem to possess determinate meanings in isolation from their use in any specific utterance.³⁹ Rather than emphasizing that words are employed to mean things in individual moments of language use (the immersed model), the contrary approach might contend that words possess, encode, or transmit meanings (the abstract model). Immersed theories tend to stress the material contexts that produce the meanings of utterances in specific, contingent acts of use. Such relational approaches to meaning attend to the manner in which individual speakers construct linguistic meaning by borrowing social norms—in variable ways—to express their intentions in response to immediate situations.⁴⁰ Instead of positing meanings as abstractions that belong to words or sentences (entities that are themselves abstract), immersive approaches identify the meanings of utterances in relation to relevant situational factors, including intentions and motives.⁴¹

To apply the distinctions I have outlined above to Early China, I maintain that conceptions of language insofar as they are evident in early Chinese texts are not abstract or detached.⁴² Instead, early Chinese texts' statements about *yan* 言

39. I do not mean to suggest that abstract models do not recognize the effects of social norms on semantic meaning. Both types of linguistic models do that.

40. See, for example, Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices*, and Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

41. As Dennis Stampe puts it, “the concept of intention, unlike the concepts of an idea, a concept, semantic marker, semantic regularity, and so forth, at least does not swim in the same orbit of conceptual space as does ‘meaning’ itself.” Stampe, “Toward a Grammar of Meaning,” 296.

42. My position on this point is slightly different from that of Christoph Harbsmeier, although he also maintains that the early Chinese interest in language was mainly social, noting that “the Chinese did not have a distinct abstract notion of language as opposed to speech, talk, words, no division between *dialektos* ‘language’ versus *logos* ‘word, speech.’” Our views diverge in that Harbsmeier posits that certain texts, such as the Mohist Canons (*Mo Bian*) and the *Xunzi*, employ terms for linguistic abstractions like “sentence” and “proposition” and that the Later Mohists had a concept of meaning but did not show interest in it as a philosophical topic. Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 46–47, 329n4.

Although different from my presentation on most details, Bao Zhiming also makes a case that language and the world are inseparable and interdependent in what he calls “the classical conception of language” in ancient China. Bao, “Language and World View,” 195, 216.

(speech) and *ming* 名 (names) would lead a reader to assume that they reflect an immersed view of linguistic practices.⁴³

For the investigation I set forth in the remainder of this book, one key attribute of the immersed model is especially pertinent: the interpenetration of language and non-language or, to put it another way, the fluidity of the boundaries between them. To the extent that abstract conceptions stress language's invariant, organizational structure, language is likely to appear as isolated from the rest of the world, particularly if the world is seen to be fluctuating or evolving. The expression "language and reality" seems to imply that language is not part of the world in the way that other things are. "Language and the world" has the same exteriorizing effect.⁴⁴ If language is the external counterpart of the world or reality, then language is a massive entity. The implications of a phrase like "language and the world" are more evident if we consider why we are so much less likely to say "speech and the world" or "names and the world." That is, juxtaposing language to either reality or the world renders it constitutive of one entire pole of human experience. Early Chinese texts, by contrast, discuss not language but speech, names, and writing. Nothing so monumental as the polar opposite of reality or the world is at issue.

Early Chinese Immersed Views of Language

Early Chinese depictions of names and speech feature some obviously "immersed" characteristics. For one, the texts do not advance grammatical terms or discuss grammar.⁴⁵ They also clearly focus on names (*ming* 名), which paradigmatically link

43. To be clear, I am not claiming that the Chinese language was incapable of formulating abstractions or that there were no discussions of abstract ideas in Early China. My point is merely that linguistic speculation in Early China did not favor thinking about language as an abstract entity.

44. To some it seems that the phrase "language and reality" need not imply that language is not itself a thing or that it is not involved in the constitution of things. For instance, Vincent Descombes argues that the idea of outside of language is not "reality plain and simple" but is "the outside reality of the sequence of language under consideration." Descombes, "Quandaries of the Referent," 55–56.

45. Arguably the *Erya* and the *Shuowen Jiezi* use terms that suggest a recognition of the difference between grammatical terms and ordinary words. For instance, Lin Yushan notes that the *Shuowen* glosses words like *jie* 皆 and *ge* 各 by means of terms like *yu* 語 and *ci* 辭, which implies that these are terms about speech. Lin, *Hanyu Yufa Xueshi*, 27. Nevertheless, the texts do not discuss them as such.

The first use of the grammatical terms "empty" and "full" dates to around the eleventh century, and grammar was not an object of study in China until the late nineteenth century. Peyraube, "Recent Issues in Chinese Historical Syntax," 164.

to actions or things (*shi* 實) and are not characterized by the (imaginary) fixity of dictionary entries as formal definitions free of context.⁴⁶ Texts from Early China do not theorize about what makes a bit of speech complete enough to constitute a unit like a “sentence.”⁴⁷ They show little interest in establishing a uniform scope for the terms that refer to different linguistic elements. For instance, terms like *ming*, *yan*, and *ci* 辭 have no standard sizes nor any rules governing what constitutes a single unit of each.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Pre-Qin texts rarely make generalized claims about large-scale diachronic linguistic changes.⁴⁹ As is often observed, early Chinese concerns about language primarily involved its practical political consequences.⁵⁰

An immersed model helps us understand a variety of early Chinese linguistic practices that might otherwise remain largely obscure. Consider, in no particular order, the following. Texts from Early China commonly use puns to explain the meaning of two apparently different terms (e.g., *de* 德 “potency” and *de* 得 “obtain”; *zheng* 政 “govern” and *zheng* 正 “straight,” etc.). Speech is concretely depicted as “breath-energy” (*qi* 氣) in the mouth, which is produced by sound and taste.⁵¹

46. See the discussion of dictionaries above.

47. The Neo-Mohists did not recognize or invent a linguistic construct like “sentence,” as opposed to a deliberately composed utterance. As Dan Robins argues, Graham provides no compelling reason to view the *Mo Bian*’s use of *ci*—in what Graham calls “Names and Objects” 10, 11, and 12—as a departure from ordinary usage. Robins, “Later Mohists and Logic,” 247–285; Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, 207.

Christoph Harbsmeier rightly notes that the use of certain particles makes it clear that early Chinese texts recognize the boundaries of a bit of speech, but to my mind, that recognition is not sufficient to establish what Harbsmeier calls an “operative concept of a sentence.” We may be defining “sentence” differently. I take the word “sentence” to involve something with a grammatical structure—something more than just a string of speech that ends. Thus, in contexts where, as Harbsmeier notes, “formulation” would do just as well for translating *ci* 辭, I would recommend retaining “formulation.” Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 175, 182–183.

48. See note 34 and chapter 1.

49. Wolfgang Behr notes, “comparison of different diachronic levels of speech” was a marginal concern in the Pre-Qin period. Behr, “Language Change,” 21.

50. My point approximates Harbsmeier’s: “The Chinese see sentences as deeply embedded in personal and social reality. The meaning of sentences was not for them a grammatical and lexical question. It was a historical question. Sentences are only messengers (*shih* 使) for meaning, they are not taken to articulate meaning literally.” Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 185–186. For my alternative interpretation of the line about phrases and names serving as messengers in the “Zhengming” chapter of the *Xunzi*, see my *Language as Bodily Practice*, 104–105.

51. See chapter 2 and *Language as Bodily Practice*, 188–189.

Taboos apply to speaking names, especially in the context of death.⁵² Also, knowing the names of ghosts and animals gives one power over them.⁵³ The prospect of “straightening” names (rectifying names) is credited with extraordinary potential benefits, including producing order, eliminating confusion, and eradicating falsehood. The “Zhengming” chapter of the *Xunzi* suggests that something beyond mere convention connects names to things when it both claims that names are

52. The *Zuozhuan* lists these naming taboos:

不以國，不以官，不以山川，不以隱疾，不以畜牲，不以器幣。周人以諱事神，名，終將諱之。故以國則廢名，以官則廢職，以山川則廢主，以畜牲則廢祀，以器幣則廢禮。

One does not use the name of a domain; one does not use the name of an office, of a mountain or a river, of a malady or illness, of domestic animals or of utensils and precious ceremonial objects. The Zhou leaders used a system of respectful concealment in serving spirits, and when one passed away, his name was avoided as respectful concealment. Therefore, using a domain name would do away with that name. Using the name of an office would do away with that official duty. Using the name of a mountain or a river would do away with the spirit master of that place. Using the name of a domestic animal would do away with a sacrifice. Using the name of a ceremonial vessel or a ceremonial gift would do away with a rite.

Zuozhuan 春秋左傳 桓公 B2.6 《桓公六年傳》 Durrant, Li, and Schaberg trans., *Zuo Tradition*, 1:101.

David Schaberg discusses the challenge of dating the *Zuozhuan*, which might have been completed ca. 300 BCE. See Schaberg, *Patterned Past*, 315–324.

The naming taboos are often explicitly a matter of speaking, as in this case:

二名不偏諱，夫子之母名微在；言在不稱微，言微不稱在。

With a double name, they [the two names] were not both avoided together. The Master’s mother’s name was Zheng-zai. When he said (*yan* 言) “Zai,” he did not call (*cheng* 稱) “Zheng.” When he said “Zheng,” he did not call “Zai.”

Liji 禮記 〈檀弓下〉

The “Qu Li Xia” chapter of the *Liji* notes several name-avoidance rules. For example,

天子不言出，諸侯不生名。

The son of Heaven should not be spoken of as “going out” (of his state). A feudal prince should not be called by his name, while alive.

Liji 禮記 〈曲禮下〉 2.17 Legge, *Li Ki*, 113.

Even if, as Dennis Grafflin argues, the naming taboos in the *Liji* represent private reverence and serve to enforce respectful conversation, the text still treats naming as a force that needs to be accommodated. Grafflin, “Onomastics,” 385.

53. For the notion of masters of naming prodigies, see Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 34–35; Sterckx, *Animal and the Daemon*, 219–221; and Harper, “Chinese Demonography,” 94–95.

conventional and asserts that names have “certain goodness” (*yougushan* 有固善).⁵⁴ The *Mengzi*’s description of Mengzi’s ability to “know speech” treats *yan* as utterances—not an abstraction—that unwittingly reveal things about the speaker.⁵⁵ Puns involving *ming* 鳴 and *ming* 名 for both human and non-human animal sounds, as well as non-human animals having the ability to speak (*yan*), also reflect an immersed approach to “language.”⁵⁶

The terminology for linguistic activity in early Chinese texts defies the stasis one might expect if they had conceived of language as abstract, standardized, and constant. Speech and names exhibit flux, as well as deviation that needs to be made straight (*zheng* 正). While speech and names should coincide (*dang* 當) with entities spatially and temporally, they often fail to do so by passing (*guo* 過) or not coming up to a limit (*jin* 盡). The texts find fault with names for being distant from that to which they refer, as if they keep slipping away from where they are supposed to be. Bad names are slanted (*yi* 倚), and speech has no closure because both speech (*yan*) and phrases (*ci*) can be “split” (*zhe* 折). It is difficult to imagine a systematic approach to language emerging from this variability and movement among names and phrases.

Method and Interpretive Theory

Donald Munro long ago observed that textual inconsistencies are an unavoidable feature of early Chinese texts, which are, quite simply, not as troubled by those inconsistencies as we are.⁵⁷ Recent discoveries about the nature of textual formation help explain why. As William Boltz describes it, early Chinese texts are composed of “moveable units” and “paragraph-size textual building blocks.”⁵⁸ Therefore, no non-circular way for adjudicating which parts of texts should be interpretively privileged

54. The *Xunzi* is attributed to Xun Kuang 荀況 (third century BCE) but scholars posit that its chapters have been rearranged. Knoblock, *Xunzi*, 1:105–128.

55. Arguing for a similar interpretation of the *Mengzi* 2A2, Jiu Heng points out, “it is unlikely that one could count on knowing a man by ‘knowing doctrines’ as such.” Heng, “Understanding Words and Knowing Men,” 155.

56. The *Liji* mentions that the parrot and ape can speak (*yan*; chapter 1.6 曲禮上). The *Shanhai Jing* asserts that some “apes know human naming” (狌狌知人名, *Shanhai Jing*, chapter 10, “Hai Nei Nan Jing”). The *Zhouli* 5.24 and 5.26 also mention that barbarians are able to speak with birds and other animals.

57. Munro, *Concept of Man*, xxi.

58. Boltz, “Composite Nature of Early Chinese Texts,” 61–62. On the concept of authorship see chapter 8, note 12.

at the expense of others seems to be available.⁵⁹ In light of these observations, my interpretations do not aim to impose a particular perspective—or “school” of thought, or retrospective heuristic—on a text. In pre-imperial texts compiled before the emergence of the idea of a school or an “author,” layers of texts, multiple editors, and graphic instability undermine the likelihood of coherent arguments stretching across large portions of text. Hence, when a text does not include part of a passage that is commonly present elsewhere, I do not assume that the omission expresses disagreement with the norm. Even when passages invoke ideas recognizable as belonging to contemporaneous texts, I take it as possible that the texts are talking past each other. There might have been “disputes,” as A. C. Graham famously argued, but the materials we possess are refracted intentions in compilations of fragments disputing fragments, not samples showing authors engaging in what we might now call reasoned debate. At best, we can look for coherence in the largest apparent textual unit while also recognizing that the multiple compilers reworking a text might have included a line or word or a whole passage for any number of reasons.

As a work of cross-cultural metalinguistics, *The Emergence of Word-Meaning in Early China* contributes an account of sociolinguistic concepts in ancient sources.⁶⁰ My task requires that ideas implicit in a broad range of texts be attended to, in part because early Chinese scholarly communities shared habits of word-use and repurposed bits of texts. My approach employs literary methods (word-pattern analysis) to construct and confirm a historically situated argument about a linguistic concept. By performing myriad searches in the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s comprehensive online “Chinese Ancient Texts” (CHANT) database, I analyze metalinguistic terms and references to speech and writing in a wide variety of sources, which include works of medicine, mathematics, literature, politics, and ritual as well as glossaries and transcripts of excavated texts. I take note of patterns of word use, parallel structures, repeated metaphors, binary oppositions, and rhetorical circumscription, and I interpret these references in light of one another.⁶¹ Insofar as dates for the

59. Chad Hansen defends applying the principle of humanity, which was coined by R. E. Grandy. Grandy, “Reference, Meaning and Belief,” 439–452. For the principle of charity, see Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” 5–20. Hansen and David Wong discuss these principles in Xiao and Yong, *Moral Relativism and Chinese Philosophy: David Wong and His Critics*.

60. I think of this as part of the “linguistic turn” with a post-humanist slant. As Magnus Course argues in a study of the rural Mapuche of South America, when post-humanists have criticized the linguistic turn, they have done so by means of “Western language ideology” and, therefore, missed the ways in which *language as actant* is not strictly human and language is not about human agency. Course, “Birth of the Word,” esp. 20–21.

61. My method does not include an etymological study of *yi* 義, for which, see Jia and Kwok, “Clan Manners,” 33–42.

“Rhetorical circumscription” is my term for the way early Chinese texts sometimes circumscribe an entity by referring to what is above, below, outside, inside, near, and far from it.

texts are available, I aim to detect not only broad patterns in usage but also changes over time that suggest new ways of thinking about language.

Instead of reconstructing philosophical arguments from early Chinese texts, I look for insight into their underlying assumptions about human situations (language, meaning, bodies, and the world). Some scholars have called stylistic patterns like those analyzed here the products of a “discourse machine” in which words simply assemble themselves in relentlessly predictable ways.⁶² I, too, think of these repeating linguistic arrangements and their variations as having a momentum of their own. And I hope this book’s account of that momentum might encourage us to attend to possible new interpretations of early Chinese texts—undermining the obviousness of our own habits of thinking and facilitating a recognition of unfamiliar ideas.

Texts from Early China construct a way of conceptualizing semantic meaning derived in part from their historical and material conditions, including their writing system, the geographic situation (relative isolation from other writing systems), increases in “textualization,” and first encounters with a radically different system of writing.⁶³ The materiality of this language in its geographical context set conditions for a way of thinking about a normative continuum that spanned from ethical action to the normativity of certain sayings, texts, earthly configurations, and heavenly shapes and movements. My book is not a conventional historical study. The “actants” in this book are habits and customs, as well as styles of the mouth when uttering, the ears when listening, the hands when writing, and the eyes when looking.⁶⁴ My description of the way in which *yi* 義 evolved from normative and ethical uses that highlighted visual materiality—that is, that were perceptible to the eyes in particular—to become a semantic term that, at some later time, came to signal a disembodied concept like “word-meaning” is new and unorthodox, based squarely as it is in an immersive model of language.⁶⁵ The novelty of my thesis should not be surprising, however, for it proceeds directly from the ability to subject an entire corpus of texts to data-driven systematic scrutiny, thus yielding fresh insights into a world vastly distant from the present. In what follows, I am attempting to understand that world of Early China, by “living within” its language.

62. Owen, “Liu Xie and the Discourse Machine,” 175. Other scholars depict the patterns as reflections of reasonable rules, attention to which should yield coherent interpretations. For instance, Rudolf Wagner, who calls this “interlocking parallel style” (IPS), sees it as that kind of rational faculty that should forestall Orientalist translations. For Wagner, IPS draws attention to argument and limits “attributing the seeming lack of coherence in Chinese philosophical arguments to inconsistent thinking by the Chinese authors.” Wagner, *Craft of a Chinese Commentator*, 56.

63. Emphasizing the importance of ritual pattern related to writing, Michael Nylan introduces this term as part of her argument that the prestige of “writing” in the Han did not necessarily entail increases in literacy. Nylan, “Textual Authority,” 229.

64. I am adapting “actant” from Bruno Latour’s sense of “acting agents” or “interveners” or what he glosses as “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial.” Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 75, 237.

65. See appendix A for a discussion of the puzzle of connecting ethical to semantic uses of *yi* 義.