ABSTRACT

Many studies have been done on compound words in Mandarin Chinese. However, there is no general consensus on the definition of compound words. The traditional Chinese philological methodology defines a compound word (in the great majority of cases) to be made-up of two root words. It allows the root words of compound words to be bound morphemes.

Traditional methodologies were used in the judgment of words. The widely used methodologies of Substitution, Isolation and Extension to distinguish words from phrases were not useful when distinguishing between phrases and compound words, which are made of free forms, and are not entirely without problems.

In this study, I have re-defined compound words as words being comprised of two or free morphemes which are words. Bound morphemes are not allowed in compound words for the purpose of this study.

This study found that the traditional definition obscured the distinction between various kinds of morphemes on the one hand and words on the other. Studies on some related topics were badly affected such as the distinction between compound words and phrases, the nature of verb-complement "compounds" etc.
While some linguists have proposed that the meaning of words could not be used in differentiating words from phrases, this study suggests that as one of the basic characteristic of words, meaning should not be ignored. This is especially important when the internal components of compound words and phrases are similar i.e. both are made up of words. Attention needs to be given to the differences in the embodied meanings: the meaning of a compound word is composite most of the time, while the meaning of a phrase is normally the combination of its components' meaning.

In order to differentiate between compound words from phrases, meaning, internal structures and speech sounds have to be considered as a whole.

For this study, relevant data are re-analyzed and re-classified based on the earlier definition into five groups, namely coordinate compound, modifier-head compound, subject-predicate compound, verb-object compound and noun-classifier compound.

This study found that the verb-complement "compounds" in Mandarin Chinese are comprised of bound morphemes. In some cases, the complement elements are in fact suffixes. These "compounds" did not conform to the definition of compound words in this study, which must be formed by free morphemes. Accordingly, verb-complement words should not be classified as compound words.