Functional Differentiation of “Guāngróng “ and “Róngguāng” in Contemporary Chinese

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“Guāngróng “ and “róngguāng” are a pair of inverse morphemes words in Chinese. Though once had same meaning, in contemporary Chinese they are in a process of functional differentiation. Now, “guāngróng” are mainly declarative, while “róngguāng” are mainly referential. Motivations of this changes are the enrichment of expressions and the refinement of functions.

Keywords: “guāngróng”, “róngguāng”, inverse morphemes words, differentiation, contemporary Chinese

Introduction

Inverse morphemes words refer to two-syllable compound words with opposite structural order of same morphemes. It is generally believed that synonymous inverse morphemes words produced with process of disyllabification (Zhang, 2002). “Guāngróng” and “róngguāng”, a pair of inverse morphemes words, are coordinate compound words, with same meanings—“honor and glory”.

Zhang Ruipeng (2002) pointed out that synonymous inverse morphemes words “make our language complex, cumbersome, and are meaningless”, so “it is necessary to strengthen the standard and eliminate the one which is less commonly used”. From this view, compared to “guāngróng”, the commonly used one, “róngguāng” should be eliminated by language users after a period of coexistence, but this is not the case. Taking five years as a node, we counted usage of the two words in “The People’s Daily”, here are the results:

Table 1
The Usage of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” In “The People’s Daily”

| Item year | “Guāngróng” | “Róngguāng” |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| 1950      | 1583        | 1           |
| 1955      | 1084        | 0           |
| 1960      | 1817        | 6           |
| 1965      | 958         | 5           |
| 1970      | 1170        | 1           |
| 1975      | 676         | 0           |
| 1980      | 672         | 4           |
| 1985      | 809         | 6           |

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According to Table 1, “guāngróng” has always been in an advantageous position in modern Chinese, while “róngguāng” almost disappeared during 1950 to 2005. However, the number of “róngguāng” began to rise significantly from 8 in 2005, reached 162 in 2019. We further focus on 2005 to 2019, and the results are as follow:

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1.* The usage of “Róngguāng” from 2005 to 2019.

According to Figure 1, from 2005 to 2013, the usage of “róngguāng” increased slowly, but after 2013, it rose sharply with an accelerated growth rate. Since the number of “róngguāng” show a dramatic increase in recent years, we believe that its usage or meaning may have changed. Bo Jiafu (1996) pointed out that competition between inverse morphemes words eventually lead to three results: elimination, coexistence, and differentiation. If some changes happen in “róngguāng”, then we can say the two word have a trend of differentiation.

In this essay, we want to solve the questions: whether the two words have the trend of differentiation or not?

**Analysis**

**Previous Views**

Modern Chinese Dictionary is one of the most authoritative dictionaries in China. Both words can be found in “Modern Chinese Dictionary (Seventh Edition)”, and their definitions are as follow:

- **Guāngróng**: ① adjective: worthy to be respected and praised by the public; ② noun: honor.
- **Róngguāng**: adjective: honor, guāngróng.

Those interpretations have three points worth noting.

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| Year | Guāngróng Frequency | Róngguāng Frequency |
|------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1990 | 767                  | 6                    |
| 2000 | 569                  | 6                    |
| 2005 | 607                  | 8                    |
| 2010 | 717                  | 38                   |
| 2015 | 586                  | 88                   |
| 2019 | 755                  | 162                  |
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Firstly, it uses “guāngróng” to explain “róngguāng” when they are both adjectives, indicating that they are synonymous as adjective, and the meaning is “worthy to be respected and praised by the public.”

Secondly, the adjective meaning of “guāngróng”, which is “worthy to be respected and praised by the public”, is closely related to its noun meaning “honor”. The dictionary says the word are both adjective and noun because “guāngróng” have different function in sentences. It is considered to be a noun when its function is to make a declaration or an adjective when its function is to refer to something.

Thirdly, the dictionary says that “róngguāng” is not a noun, but in contemporary Chinese “róngguāng” can be used as a noun with a referential function, which is very common today. For example:

(1) nénnggòu tóushēn hé jiānzhēng zhē yǐjùyǒu lìchēngbǐ yìyì de lǐshǐ jinchéng, shì wǒmenzhēyǐdàirén de nándì jiǔhè zúidà róngguāng. (The People’s Daily, 2020.5.22)

In (1), “róngguāng” are referential and are modified by the attributive “zúidà”.

However, the two words show several differences when they are both referential or declarative. Next, we will investigate the two functions separately.

Comparison of Declarative “Guāngróng” and “Róngguāng”

The declarative “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” can be used as attributive and predicate, and both can be modified by adverbs. For example:

(2A) zhějiāng shòujíāngtuān yīxíng shòupēng jiāngbēi, jiānzhēng zhōngguó nóngcūn fūzhàn shōudào shìjiē zhūmò de guāngróng shíkè. (The People’s Daily, 2018.12.29)

(2B) liànggàn tóngbāo gòngtóng jiānzhēng zǔguó fānróng, mínzhù qiángshèng de róngguāng shíkè. (The People’s Daily, 2020.1.2)

(3A) fùzǐ liángdài rén, yīgē yuèbǐngmèng, gěnghékuàng wǒshī tiānānmén de bǐng, zǎi zǐjí riyè shǒuwěi de difāng jiēshǒu jiānyù, wūbǐ zìháo, wūbǐ guāngróng! (The People’s Daily, 2019.9.27)

(3B) jǐngwèibǐng suīrén méiyǒu fāshè dàodàn de jīhuí, dànzúówěi dàodàn de “shōuhūshén”, tāmén hé fāshèchēng de guāngróng yīyàng wūbǐ zìháo, wūbǐ róngguāng. (The People’s Daily, 2014.10.16)

In (2A) and (2B), “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” are attributives and they modify the noun “shíkè”. In (3A) and (3B), “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” are predicates, which are modified by the adverb “wūbǐ”. “Wūbīguāngróng / Wūbī róngguāng” and “wūbǐ zìháo” are parallel clauses in the two sentences.

However, there are several differences between declarative “guāngróng” and “róngguāng”, mainly as follows:

Firstly, there are differences in the syntactic functions.

“Guāngróng” can be an adverb to modify verbal components, but we cannot find the example where “róngguāng” an adverbial.

“Guāngróng” often be used as a complement, while “róngguāng” seldom be used as complement. We find 103 cases where “guāngróng” is complement in “The People’s Daily” and the BCC literary database and. However, we only find 1 case where “róngguāng” is a complement in the two database.

Secondly, there are differences in the combination ability.
“Guāngróng” can combine with complements, while “róngguāng” cannot. We find 34 cases where “guāngróng” combines with complements in “The People’s Daily” and the BCC literary database. But we cannot find the usage where “róngguāng” combines with complements.

“Guāngróng” can combine with the negative adverb “bú”, while “Rongguang” cannot. We find 425 cases of “bú guāngróng” and no case of “bú róngguāng” in “The People’s Daily” and the BCC literary database.

“Guāngróng” can combine with many degree adverbs, while “róngguāng” combine with few degree adverbs. We searched some combinations of “guāngróng” or “róngguāng” and degree adverbs in “The People’s Daily”, and here are the result:

| item       | degree adverb | Guāngróng | Róngguāng |
|------------|---------------|------------|-----------|
| absolute degree adverbs | tài          | 13         | 0         |
|             | wànfēn       | 21         | 0         |
|             | jǐqǐ         | 367        | 0         |
|             | duōme        | 216        | 1         |
|             | fēi cháng    | 355        | 1         |
|             | hěn          | 529        | 0         |
|             | wūbǐ        | 210        | 7         |
|             | géwái       | 10         | 1         |
| relative degree adverbs | gèngjiā/gèng | 419        | 6         |
|             | yuè         | 131        | 0         |
|             | zui         | 1239       | 6         |

As shown in the table, “róngguāng” cannot combine with some degree adverbs such as “tài, wànfēn, jǐqǐ, hěn, yuè”. At the same time, when combined with same degree adverbs, the usage of “degree adverbs + guāngróng” was far more than that of “degree adverbs + róngguāng”.

Thirdly, in terms of word-formation ability, “guāngróng” can be used as a compound morpheme to form three-syllable words, but “róngguāng” cannot. The Modern Chinese Dictionary (Seventh Edition) contains the three-syllable word “guāngróngbǎng”. We also find other three-syllable words in newspaper, such as “guāngróngrái, guāngróngyuàn, guāngróngcě, guāng róng gān”, and “guāngróngbǎng” in these words cannot be replaced by “róngguāng”. It shows that the word-formation ability of “guāngróng” is stronger.

Comparison of Referential “Guāngróng” and “Róngguāng”

The referential “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” can be used as subject and object, and can be modified by adjectives, or the the classifiers “zhòng, lèi”. For example:

(4A) dàn dui tā lái jiāng, zuidāde róngguāng shì “bā rénshēng de zhīdiǎn, jiānlǐ zài zúguó de zuiqíánxiàn”. (The People’s Daily, 2017.7.28)

(4B) wǒmen zuidāde guāngróng shì yòng jī de làodòng chéngguò zhīyuánle zúguó jīngji jiānshè hé kàngměiyuáncháo zhǎnzhèng. (The People’s Daily, 2013.12.16)

(5A) ér tāmén yì bā zhēfēn guāngróng, yǔ chénmò gěngjiùde, zǎo yī shìqiúde zhānyǒu fēnxiǎng. (The People’s Daily, 2019.12.30)
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(5B) zhèbèiz dōu bùkěnèng yòu zhèfèn róngguàng! wò nàshìxiàn xiāng. (The People’s Daily, 2019.11.9)

In (4A) and (4B), the referential “guàngróng” and “róngguàng” are subjects, modified by the adjective “zuìdà”. In (5A) and (5B), the referential “guàngróng” and “róngguàng” are objects, which are modified by the classifiers “zhòng. In these four cases, “guàngróng” and “róngguàng” can be replaced by each other.

However, the two words still have the following differences when they are both referential:

Firstly, some verbs only combine with “róngguàng”, such as “cāiliàng” “mùyù” “jǔqǐ” “shānyào” “chōngyìng” “zhànfàng” “huànfā” “diǎnlìàng”.

Secondly, some classifiers only can modify “róngguàng”, including “piàn” “dào” “shù”.

The verbs and quantifiers mentioned above that only combine with “róngguàng” have a common feature: they can combine with the noun “guáng”, which means light. The users treat abstract “róngguàng” as a specific thing like “light” for rhetorical purposes under the influence of metaphorical mechanisms, so they combine “róngguàng” with those verbs and quantifiers.

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As we can see, when both are declarative, “guàngróng” has more syntactic distributions, stronger combination ability and word-formation ability than “róngguàng”. When both are referential, “róngguàng” has stronger combination ability. Therefore, the conclusion is that “guàngróng” is more declarative while “róngguàng” is more referential. The two words have a functional differentiation: “guàngróng” is mainly declarative, and “róngguàng” mainly referential. There are other three evidences that can support our idea:

The first evidence is the frequency. We extracted the latest 300 use cases of “guàngróng” and “róngguàng” in The People’s Daily and counted the usage of the words according to their functions. Here are the results:

Table 3

| function  | “Guàngróng” | “Róngguàng” |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Referential | 31          | 273         |
| Declarative | 269         | 27          |

According to Table 3, “guàngróng” mainly are declarative, with 269 declarative use cases while “Róngguàng” mainly are referential, with 273 referential use cases.

The second evidence is the fixed phrases. The fixed phrases of “guàngróng” are “guàngróng chuántǒng” “guàngróng chēnghào” “guàngróng shímíng” “guàngróng lǐshí” and in the fixed phrases, “guàngróng” is declarative and it can modify the noun following it. The fixed phrases of “róngguàng” are “tiěxuē róngguàng”, “yǔxué róngguàng”, and in the fixed phrases, “róngguàng” is referential and it is modified by other words.

The third evidence is the syntactical representations of the two words when they co-occur. When the two words co-occur, mostly, “guàngróng” is declarative while “róngguàng” is referential, for example:

(6) zhèshì wǒmen zhègè guàngróng jiātǐng de wūzhǎng róngguàng. (The People’s Daily, 2015.9.4)

(7) tàiān shì cóng qiānglíndānyǔ zhōng zǒulái de guàngróng qiànbèi, tàiān shì cóng kūnán huíhuàng zhōng zǒulái de yǐnxíng zhuàngshī, tàiān jǐntiān dàiāole zhīgào fùyú, zhèshī tàiān yǐngdède róngguàng! (The People’s Daily, 2015.9.4)
In (6), “guāngróng” is declarative and modifies the noun “jiātíng”, while “róngguāng” is referential and is modified by the adjective “wūshàng”. That is true for (7), where “guāngróng” is declarative while “róngguāng” is referential. The two sentences would be unacceptable if “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” interchange their positions. That indicates that the language users believe the two words have different function.

In conclusion, the functional differentiation of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” has various evidences. However, this differentiation is processing. Therefore, at this stage, the two words still overlap in function and usage. In the future, this differentiation pattern may be further determined.

**The Motivation of Functional Differentiation**

There are two motivation of the functional differentiation of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng”. The first is the enrichment of expression, and the second is the refinement of functions.

**The Enrichment of Expression**

The alternate use of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” with different functions can make sentences full of changes and enhance the expression effect. If the referential function and the declarative function are undertaken by a same word in one sentence, although it meets the grammatical requirements, it lacks change and unnatural. The interlacing of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng” not only exists within the sentence, but also appear between sentence and sentence, paragraph and paragraph, and even the title and the main body. For example:

(8) Shūxiě láodòng zhē xīn shídài de róngguāng
láodòng guāngróng, chèngjiǔ mèngxiāng; láodòng zhē wěidà, chuàngzào lǐshǐ.

In (8), “Shūxiě láodòng zhē xīn shídài de róngguāng” is the title of the new. In the first paragraph of the main text, the declarative “guāngróng” is the predicate. It responds to the topic and make the article full of changes.

It can be seen that the pursuit of richness and variability in expression is an important motive for the differentiation of “guāngróng” and “róngguāng”.

**The Refinement of Functions**

One characteristic of the development of contemporary Chinese is “precise expression systems and methods” (Diao, 2016). From the perspective of language norms, the differentiation of inverse morphemes words is “a concrete manifestation of language precision, conforms to the law of language development, and enriches Chinese vocabulary” (Hou, 1987).

From ancient Chinese to modern Chinese, many Inverse Morphemes Words with the same structure, meaning and function have differentiated. Some differentiations happen in structure. For example, “wāngluò” and “luówàng” were coordinate structures at the beginning. But the latter is analogized to a modifier-head compound in today’s Chinese, and its meaning and function have changed (Xiao, 2019). Some differentiations happen in meaning. For example, “yàojǐn” have some bleaching meaning today while “jǐnyào” remind the old meaning (Tang, 2015). Another example are “dádào” and “dàodá”, which had differentiation on grammatical meaning during the development. The objects of the former mainly are abstract nouns; the object of the latter is mainly specific nouns of location.

“Guāngróng” and “róngguāng” show the functional differentiation of inverse morphemes words. The two words divide the declarative function and the referential function while the structure and meaning remain the
same. In the process, they show several differences in word-formation ability, syntactic function, fixed phrase, and the combinations with other word classes. The differentiation not only creates conditions for language users to accurately and precisely express their ideas, but also allows users to efficiently understand the structure and meaning. For example, “guāngróng zhànffāng” can be quickly identified as an adverbial-verb structure, while “róngguāng zhànffāng” tends to be understood as a subject-predicate construction.

At the same time, choosing “róngguāng”, instead of creating new words to differentiate the functions of “guāngróng” shows the principles of linguistic economics. This way can reduce the memory burden of language users and improve the efficiency of functional differentiation.

Summary

This article finds that the frequency of use of “róngguāng” has risen sharply in recent years, which is closely related to the trend of functional differentiation between “guāngróng” and “róngguāng”. The former is mainly declarative, and the latter is mainly referential. Because of the trend of functional differentiation, “róngguāng” is mainly referential, which means that it is mostly used as a noun. Therefore, we suggest to add a noun meaning to “róngguāng” in the dictionary in order to guide people’s how to use this word.

The differentiation of the two words in contemporary Chinese also give us the following enlightenment:

Firstly, we should study common words of contemporary Chinese from the historical perspective. Diao Yanbin (2016) pointed out that “the change of common words can be a good window to observe the diachronic development of lexic systemof contemporary Chinese”. The case study of the common word “guāngróng” can help us to deeply explore the deep law of synonymous words. Moreover, making micro-comparison to explore the usage and functional development of the words, can make the conclusion more reliable.

Secondly, we should treat new changes of words with a flexible standard. There are explicit words as well as implicit words in a language. If the conditions for the explicitness of the implicit words are met, the implicit words will come out to occupy the place (Yu, 1999). “Róngguāng” once almost disappear in daily use, but in contemporary Chinese it becomes more common, which indicates the word are becoming explicit from implicit. If we artificially eliminate “róngguāng” from the beginning, the functional differentiation of the words will not able to happen. Therefore, treating new changes of words with an tolerate viewpoint, giving the chances to the language system to regulate itself, can provide the possibility for contemporary Chinese to be full of vitality.

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