

COMPARING THE INCOMPARABLE? ENGLISH ADJECTIVES IN -ABLE AND THEIR RENDERING IN MODERN CHINESE

ARTHUR METTINGER

University of Vienna

1. INTRODUCTION

It has often been maintained that the aim of contrastive linguistics is "...the comparison of two or more languages (or subsystems of languages) in order to determine both the differences and similarities that hold between them". (Fisiak 1980:1)

The study in hand will try to answer the question whether a comparative analysis of phenomena found in allegedly structurally disparate languages like English and Chinese can be attempted and whether there are any results to be obtained from such an undertaking.

As subject matter I have chosen the rendering of English adjectives derived from verbs or nouns by means of the suffix *-able*¹ in Modern Chinese.² As this is one of the first attempts of a comparative English-Chinese micro-study I confine myself to a purely surface-structural analysis, and I should also like to point out that, as the material of my investigation consists largely of entries in Chinese-English and English-Chinese dictionaries, any conclusions I make should be regarded as tentative, requiring further corroboration or rejection from a large-scale corpus study.

¹ The variants [ɛbl], [ɪbl] and [juɪl] will be treated alike in this study since from a synchronic-comparative point of view this differentiation has no bearing on the translatability of the respective lexical item.

² "Modern Chinese" is to be understood as *pǔtōnghuà*, the standard Chinese spoken in the People's Republic of China ("Moderne chinesische Hochsprache"). The transcription used is *pinyin*.

2. ADJECTIVES IN *-ABLE* IN ENGLISH³

2.0. In this chapter I shall try to give a preliminary grouping of the adjectives in question with regard to their derivational properties and semantic analysability.

The examination will be a purely synchronic one, i.e. it is concerned with existing lexemes, regardless of their origin and history.

2.1. Terzjan quite correctly observes that adjectives with the suffix *-able* do not form a homogeneous group in the system of present-day English (Terzjan 1962:21). A brief look will show that one large class is formed by suffixation of *-able* to a verb, e.g. *breakable*, *eatable*, *believable* (cf. Chapin 1970:57); another class consists of denominal derivatives, e.g. *marriageable*, *knowledgeable*, *reasonable*, and of adjectives like *possible*, *potable*, *amicable*, usually regarded as having nonfree stems (cf. Chapin 1970:57).

Yet another group consists of derived adjectives in *-able* whose basis exists either as a substantive or a verb — Marchand (1969²:229) mentions *comfortable*, *favorable*, *profitable*, whereas I think that this description refers more to adjectives like *respectable* or *honourable*, as they have different meanings depending on the word-class of their respective bases.

2.2. For the purpose of classification of adjectives in *-able* in English and subsequent comparison with their Chinese counterparts I shall adhere to

- a) Marchand's demand that "prefixal and suffixal composites must be opposable to their unprefixal and unsuffixal forms" (Marchand 1969²:3), which will exclude forms like *possible*, *potable*, *amicable* for not allowing this opposition, and
- b) a scale of word-formational/semantic transparency, which I shall try to establish in order to be able to describe the word-formational and semantic analysability of lexemes according to the principle that "...the meaning of a morphologically complex word will be a compositional function of the meanings of its parts". (Aronoff 1976:127).

2.2.1. Aronoff (1976:127) points out that the basic compositional meaning "for words of the form *Xable* is 'liable to be Yed' or 'capable of being Yed' (where Y is the base of the word in question)". This analysis, however, presupposes that Y is a verb and that the suffix *-able* expresses MODALITY (POSSIBILITY, NECESSITY).

2.2.2. If Y is a noun, we shall find it more difficult to establish a basic compositional meaning. Poldauf (1959:237f) suggests that denominal adjectives in *-able* express evaluation ("Wertung"), and he tries a subdivision depending on semantic features of the base noun Y:

³ The following chapter is based on previous investigations in this field: Poldauf (1959), Terzjan (1962), Chapin (1967, 1970), Marchand (1969²), Abraham (1970), Aronoff (1976).

- (i) Y is already marked semantically with regard to evaluation, i.e. Y expresses something positive or negative: in that case the derived adjective would be paraphrasable as 'doing, bringing, affording, showing ... Y', e.g. *knowledgeable* ('showing knowledge'), *pleasurable* ('giving pleasure'), *honourable* ('bringing honour').
- (ii) Y is not marked with regard to evaluation: adjectives derived from these nouns could be paraphrased as 'having, showing ... good/great Y'.

Examples of this type would be *reasonable*, *sensible*, *fashionable*, *sizable* ... Poldauf's classification, though based partly on apparently intuitive semantic criteria, nevertheless helps to establish a group of adjectives in *-able* that share similar word-formational and semantic properties.

Yet there are other denominal adjectives like *marriageable* 'fit for marriage', 'old enough for marriage' (ALD)⁴; *impressionable* 'easily influenced' (ALD), *objectionable* 'likely to be objected to' (ALD), *actionable* 'giving just cause for legal action' (ALD), *companionable* 'friendly, sociable' (ALD) and many others that fulfil Marchand's requirement of being opposable to the respective un-suffixal forms as well as to other composites containing the dependent morpheme *-able* (cf. Marchand 1969²: 3) and must therefore be included in the analysis and investigated as to how they are rendered in Chinese, although they do not seem to exhibit a basic compositional meaning as the one proposed by Poldauf.

2.3. A contrastive analysis will be meaningful only if we try to arrange the lexical material to be investigated according to a criterion that takes into account both word-formational and semantic properties. The criterion I will use in my study is "word-formational/semantic transparency".

2.3.1. One might, at that point, opt for "lexicalization" to be used as a means of classification, as this term, if used as by Lipka (1977) could cover all the cases where *-able* does not express MODALITY (as in *knowledgeable*, *pleasurable*, *reasonable*, *comfortable*...). On the other hand, as the term "lexicalization" is used both for characterizing complex lexical items that have lost their status as word-formation syntagmas and have become „eine einzige lexikalische Einheit mit spezifischem Inhalt" (Lipka 1977:155) and for describing the diachronic process due to which such entities develop (cf. Lipka 1977:162), I should like to use the term "transparency" instead for the simple reason that it will be applicable to English and Chinese lexical material alike and that it will reflect more clearly the synchronic viewpoint of my comparison.

2.3.2. A complex lexical item is (fully) transparent if its semantic and formal properties are completely deducible from its constituents and its

⁴ ALD means that the meanings of the adjectives discussed are given here as in Hornby (1974³).

word-formational model. We must assume different degrees of transparency according to the easiness/difficulty of analysis, which is determined by the degree of deviation from a standard paraphrase. *Believable*, for example, is analysable as V+suffix *-able* '(sth) can be believed'. *Considerable*, on the other hand, though word-formationally identical with *believable*, cannot be paraphrased as '(sth) can be considered' but has to be explained as meaning 'great, much, important' (ALD), and we can say that *considerable* is semantically less transparent than *believable*, i.e. lexicalization and transparency are related in that the higher the degree of lexicalization of a lexical item the lower will be the degree of its semantic transparency.

3. COMPARISON

3.1. Fully transparent in English would be deverbal adjectives of the type *eatable*, *drinkable*, *fixable*, *loveable*..., which are formed according to the principle of relative motivation and belong to that group of lexical syntagmas, "deren Bedeutungen bei Kenntnis der Bestandteile und der Kombinationsregeln aus der morphologischen Form abgeleitet werden können" (Kastovsky 1982 : 151). They can be regarded as a clear case of suffixation where the suffix "is a bound morpheme which in a syntagma AB occupies the position B. It thus is the determinatum of a syntagma whose determinant is a simple or complex free morpheme..." (Marchand 1969² : 209). Needless to say that the suffix *-able* has changed the word-class of the base.

Semantically, adjectives of this type are marked positively with regard to MODALITY, in a majority of cases more specifically with regard to POSSIBILITY. Different semantic paraphrases have been suggested, e.g. by Marchand (1969² : 230): 'fit for doing/being done'; by Aronoff (1976 : 48): 'capable of being Xed' (where X is the base); or by Chapin (1967 : 54):

- (1) (i) These coupons are redeemable for cash.
- (ii) These coupons can be redeemed for cash.
- (iii) One can redeem these coupons for cash.

All these paraphrases (except for Marchand's 'fit for doing' to which I will return later) clearly express that the base verb must be passivizable and that the derivative itself has passive meaning.

I shall use a 'can/may/must be Xed'-analysis (X is the base) and paraphrase

- (2) *eatable* as '(sth) can be eaten'
- fixable* as '(sth) can be fixed'
- loveable* as '(sb/?sth) can/may be loved'

3.2. The Chinese counterparts of the three adjectives listed in (2) would be

- (3) *kě-chī-* (de)

'can-[be].eat[en]-(subordinating particle)⁵

kě-guǐdìng- (de)

'can-[be] fix[ed]-(subordin. part.)

kě-ài- (de)

'can-[be] love[d]-(subordin. part.)

3.2.1. Word-formationally these adjectives are transparent, too, and can be analysed as containing the element *kě* and a verbal base, where *kě* may be regarded as a prefix. Thus, Chao Yuan Ren in his *Grammar of spoken Chinese* (p. 211f.) speaks of "versatile first morphemes in compounds", which he calls "prefixes", and among prefixes before a verb also lists — *kě* 'worth ... -ing', '-able'. The semantic function of the prefix *kě* is thus obviously the expression of MODALITY.

3.2.2. Both the English *V -able* and the Chinese *kě - V* constructions seem to share the same status as word-formation syntagmas in that they can be matched by appropriate syntactic paraphrases:

(4) *eatable things*

'things (that) can be eaten'

kě-chī-de dōngxi = 'dōngxi *kěyi* *chī*'

'things can [be] eat [en]'

In many cases Chinese *kě-V* constructions are more difficult to paraphrase syntactically, as their constituents often appear in "abbreviated" form as is also the case with *kě* 'can' which can be regarded as part of *kěyi* 'can, may' or *kěnéng* 'can'.

3.2.3. As in English, the passive meaning of the verbal base in the derived word is not morphologically marked, but seems to be indicated by the prefix *kě*, as in

(5) *kě-ài-de háizi*

'can-[be] love [d]-(subordin. part.) child' —

'a loveable child', i.e. 'a child that can be loved'

and not 'a child that is capable of loving'.

3.3. Other examples of deverbal English adjectives in *-able* expressing MODALITY which are rendered by the *kě-V*-construction in Chinese would be:

(6) *appreciable*

'(sth) can be appreciated'

kě-gūjì-(de)

'(sth) 'can-[be] appraise[d]'

governable

'(sth) can be governed'

kě-tǒngzhì-(de)

'can-[be] rule[d]'

kě-kòngzhì-(de)

'can-[be] control[led]/dominate[d]'

⁵ The subordinating particle *de* is often used to subordinate an adjectival construction to the nominal construction it modifies.

comparable	'(sth) can be compared'
kě-bǐjiào-(de)	'can-[be] compare[d]'
explainable	'(sth) can be explained'
kě-shuōmíng-(de)	'can-[be] explain[ed]'

It is, in fact, fascinating to see that this word-formational type has similar properties in English and Chinese:

(i) MODALITY is expressed by word-formational devices (suffixation in English, prefixation in Chinese)

(ii) The basic verb appears in a PASSIVE reading

(iii) The basic verb must apparently be transitive

3.4. Another point worth discussing is the kind of MODALITY expressed by the adjective in *-able*. In the majority of cases this is POSSIBILITY, as in *hateable*, *detestable* (*kě-wù*)⁸; *pitiabile* (*kě-lián*), *laughable* (*kě-xiào*); *reliable*, *dependable* (*kě-kào*), *questionable* (*kě-yí*), *removable*, *detachable* (*kě-chāi*).

The adjective *payable*, however, can mean either '(sth) can be paid' or '(sth) must be paid'. Chinese *kě* in that case is used only in the POSSIBILITY reading, viz. *kě-zhīfù-(de)* — 'can-[be] pay[d]', whereas the NECESSITY reading is rendered as *yīng-zhīfù-(de)* — 'must-[be] pay[d]'. This goes to show that the suffix *-able* in English has a wider scope within the dimension MODALITY than the Chinese prefix *kě*.

3.5. It would be an oversimplification to assume that every English *V-able* syntagma corresponds to one Chinese *kě-V*-syntagma. *Breakable*, for example, though apparently clearly analysable as '(sth) can be broken', is rendered in Chinese as *yì-pòsuì* 'easy-break into pieces', and it is impossible without context to decide whether to assume an ACTIVE or a PASSIVE reading. *Changeable*, on the other hand, which Marchand (1969²: 230) lists as a deverbial adjective with both an active and a passive sense ('fit for doing'/'fit for being done') is rendered either as *kě-biàn-(de)* — 'can-[be] change[d]' or as *yì-biàn-(de)* — 'easy-change' (in the sense of 'changing easily').

3.5.1. One explanation of this phenomenon might be that *yì* 'easy' is used to form adjectives that refer to inherent qualities of the modified noun. A corroboration of this assumption would be *yì-rán pǐn* 'easy-burn goods', i.e. *inflammable goods*, where inflammability might be regarded as an inherent quality of the goods mentioned.

Variable is regarded by Marchand as having an active sense (Marchand 1969²: 230), which should make it paraphrasable as '(sth) can vary'. However, if we look up the item *variable* in an English-Chinese dictionary, we will find two entries: *yì biàn (de)* — 'easy vary', which would correspond to Marchand's classification of *variable* as having an active sense, and *kě-biàn-(de)* — '(sth) can-[be] vary[d]'.

⁸ Chinese equivalents given in brackets all show the structure *kě - V*.

3.5.2. A better explanation of this phenomenon of dual rendering would be one on syntactic grounds: *break*, *change*, and *vary* can be either transitive or intransitive verbs. The adjectives derived from the transitive verbs have a PASSIVE reading ('can be broken', 'can be changed', 'can be varied') and tend to be rendered in Chinese by the *kě-V* construction (the lack of a possible *kě-pò* — 'can-[be] break [broken]' in the English-Chinese dictionary should probably be regarded as a gap due to unsystematic listing and should not invalidate the above statement), the adjectives derived from intransitive verbs have an ACTIVE reading and tend to be rendered *yì-V*.

Further corroboration for this explanation would be the rendering of *perishable* (derived from the intransitive verb *perish*) as *yì-sǐ-(de)* — 'easy-die'.

3.6. Another interesting point is the difference of semantic transparency of deverbial adjectives in *-able* in English and Chinese.

It seems to be the case that as soon as the suffix *-able* in a derived adjective loses the feature [+MODALITY] the adjective becomes less transparent semantically and its formation is less clear. Consider, for example, the adjective *honourable*. If it is regarded as a deverbial adjective it can be paraphrased as '(sth/sb) can be honoured' and is rendered as *kě-zūnjìng-(de)* — 'can -[be] honour[ed]', i.e. semantically transparent with regard to MODALITY. If, however, it is regarded as a denominal adjective meaning 'possessing or showing the principles of honour' (ALD) its Chinese equivalent would be *róngyù (de)*, i.e. in that case the Chinese noun *róngyù* 'honour' would be subordinated by the particle *de* to the noun it modifies and would thus fulfil the function of an adjective meaning 'having honour, showing honour'.

3.7. This dual rendering in Chinese would corroborate Aronoff's assumption (cf. Aronoff 1976: 48) that there are two different affixes *-able* at work: one found in deverbial adjectives with the meaning 'capable of being Xed' (where X is the base), and one found in denominal adjectives meaning 'characterized by X' (where X is the base), i.e. *-able₁* expresses MODALITY, *-able₂* does not.

Thus deverbial *respectable* '(sth/sb) can be respected' is rendered as *kě-jìng-(de)* — 'can-[be] respect[ed]', whereas denominal *respectable* 'of good character and good social position' (ALD) is rendered as *xiàngyàng-(de)* — 'up to the mark/decent/sound' (the Chinese translation does not seem to cover the scope of meaning denominal *respectable* has in English, which goes to show that the less transparent the item is in English the more difficult it is to find a suitable Chinese counterpart).

3.8. I think that the semantic vagueness of *-able₂*, characteristic of non-nexus combinations (cf. Marchand 1969²: 39ff.), results in a lower degree of semantic transparency of the denominal adjectives. Therefore it is not surprising to see that Chinese does not offer systematic word-formational devices for rendering English *N-able* constructions, e.g.

(7) profitable 'bringing profit' (ALD):

- yǒu yì (de) 'have profit'
 yǒu lì (de) 'have advantage'
 impressionable 'easily influenced' (ALD):
 yì shòu yǐngxiǎng-(de) — 'easy[ly] accept influence'
 knowledgeable 'having much knowledge' (ALD):
 yǒu zhīshi-(de) — 'have knowledge'
 marriageable 'old enough for marriage' (ALD)
 dá dào jiéhūn niánlíng-(de) — '[have] reach[ed] marriage age'

4. CONCLUSION

By comparing what might have seemed to be incomparable I hope to have proved once again the feasibility and usefulness of contrastive analyses. It has been surprising and fascinating to see word-formation at work in different languages, expressing similar semantic dimensions by similar means. Whether the findings of this paper are to be seen in a wider linguistic context will be the goal of further studies.

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