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The Strength of the Flow of Japanese Words into Chinese: ‘ke neng’ (可能ka nou) as a Case in Point

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The epistemic adverb ‘ke neng (ka nou in Japanese,可能 in characters)’ in Chinese is not a native word, but a loan word from Japanese during Meiji period when Japanese translated western documents using Chinese characters to express the meaning of ‘virtual, possibility’. This case shows the depth of Japanese words’ influence on Chinese language in the early 20th century.

Keywords: ke neng (ka nou in Japanese, 可能 in characters) ; epistemic adverb
loan word

I. Introduction

It is believed that most loan words(not including creoles) are nouns indicating new concepts and new staff, for example, ‘ke xue’(science), ‘sha fa’(sofa). Researchers have paid more attention to this groups of Chinese loan words from Japanese in the early 20th century and only in Shen (2010) some verbs, adjectives and phrases have been mentioned to show that the depth of the ‘borrowing’. In this paper , a brief probe into the origin of ‘ke neng’ (ka nou, 可能, below) will be taken to illustrate that even function words could be borrowed in the flow of Japanese words into Chinese.

II. The ‘origin’ of ‘ke neng’ and the faults in the literature

In modern Chinese Putonghua ‘ke neng’ can be used as:

A) a sentential adverb with an epistemic meaning of ‘maybe, perhaps and probably’ which is the speaker’ s conjecture of what he has said in a statement (not a question), occupying two positions (at the begging of the sentence and between the subject and the predicate) without changing the semantic of the sentence (not in pragmatics): ¹⁾

1) ‘ke neng’ can also be an adverb modifying verb phrases.

他可能是老师／可能他是老师。

Maybe he is a teacher.

B) an adjective equivalent to 'possible' as in:

可能的选择 a possible choice

C) a noun equivalent to 'possibility'

There are different opinions as to the form class of 'ke neng' expressing the speaker's epistemic evaluation of the statement: Lv (2002), Dong (2011) and Zhang (2000) address it as 'an adverb'; Ma (1988) and Qi (2002) regard it as an auxiliary verb; Tang (2000) a modal verb or modal adjective and Zhu(2006) a modal verb. Like these researchers, in this paper the usage of B) and C) are not taken into account and only the usage of A) is discussed. We argue that 'ke neng' expressing the epistemic meaning of the statement is a sentential adverb because an auxiliary verb or a modal verb cannot be located at the initial position to express the speaker's epistemic attitude toward the statement (with a domain of the whole statement).

Although it has been pointed out that 'ken eng xing (可能性)' is a loan word from Japanese in Wang Lida (1958), 'ke neng' was ignored and it even had been considered a native word in Wang Li (1988 : 681) for he argues that many abstract meanings and concepts are in different peoples' minds and so is 'ke neng'; otherwise 'ke neng' would have been considered a loan word.²⁾ Others also share the same opinion and have tried to describe the origin and the development of 'ke neng' in Chinese from a diachronic aspect. This paper will begin from the literature about the origin of 'ke neng'.

Zheng (2001, unpublished) holds that 'ke neng' is a result of the grammaticalization of the auxiliary verb 'ke neng' and can be found in materials in Qing dynasty as in the following sentences:

1) 九月初八日(丁巳)载:蔡牵可能窜至江苏洋面。(清仁宗实录选)

On Sep. 8th it is recorded that: Cai Qian can (may) flee to the ocean near to Jiangsu.
(*The records of Jiaqing Emperor*)

2) 酌其可能,量势买补。(雍正硃批奏摺选辑一)

(...) considering its ability to provide grains and goods.(*A selection of Yongzheng Emperor's written instructions*)

But Zheng fails to describe the course of the grammaticalization of the auxiliary verb 'ke neng' and there are only two examples in Zheng's paper. The example of 1) is not a sentence in the data but appears in the preface by modern people. 'ke neng' in 2) may not

2) 王力(1988:681):“多数的新词是由新的概念产生的。但是不能机械地了解新的概念。例如‘政策’这一个概念,不能说原来汉人心中绝对没有它,只是说没有经常地作为一个概念来表现在语言里。如果从这个角度上看,就连‘可能’、‘自然’之类也可以认为新词了。”

necessarily be interpreted as 'maybe, perhaps, probably' because in ancient Chinese the word of the same characters can be found to be an auxiliary verb taking the meaning of 'have the ability to, be able to' (or as an auxiliary verb juxtaposition: 'ke' 可 meaning 'may' and 'neng' meaning 'can') and 'ke neng' here may be of this annotation to express 'ability' instead of the speaker's attitude.

Dong (2011 : 262-263) and Yang (2012: 21) are of almost the same opinion as Zheng but provide an earlier example in Tang dynasty:

3) 萧艾转肥兰蕙瘦，可能天亦妒馨香。(唐·韩偓《偶题》)

The wormwood is flourishing while the fragrant thoroughwort is fading: 'ke neng' the sky is also jealousy of its fragrance. (Poetry lines by Han Wo in Tang dynasty)

But Dong and Yang have mistakenly interpreted the 'ke neng' in this line and the sentence should be marked with a question mark at the end because 'ke' here serves as a question function word and 'ke neng' is of the meaning 'is it so that'. In discussing the origin of the 'question function word' 'ke' in modern Chinese, Jiang (1990: 45) has pointed that the question function word 'ke' can be dated to Tang dynasty and has provided numerous examples of this type of 'ke' and 'ke neng' can be often found but it is not a word and 'ke' and 'neng' are in different syntactic levels. And Zheng also noted that 'ke neng' in Tang dynasty mostly is used to express 'question', not the speaker's conjecture. This usage of 'ke neng' can also be found in many dialects now in China (Jiang, 1990).

Zhu (2006) is of the point of view that the epistemic 'ke neng' in modern Chinese is not a grammaticalization of the auxiliary verbs 'ke' + 'neng' in ancient Chinese, but a result of development of *the question function word 'ke' + 'neng'* : the question function word 'ke' and 'neng' are used in juxtaposition in a general question and the existence of a question particle at the end reduces the function of the question word 'ke' and 'ke neng' gradually is reanalyzed as an adverb indicating the speaker's uncertainty. Zhu (2006: 124) argues that the question function word 'ke' has disappeared in northern dialects after late Qing dynasty and only can be found in Suzhou dialect, Hefei dialect and Kunming dialect. Zhu's example is as follows:

4) 自己六十岁了，还敢出肩重任，道德不充实可能有这个勇气？(老舍《蛤藻集·且说屋里》)

(He) himself is already in his sixties but dare to shoulder important tasks: without a great dignity would he have the courage to do so? (*Qie Shuo Wu Li* by Laoshe)

While in this question, 'ke neng' is also what Jiang has discussed about: the semantic of 'ke neng' is 'is it possible', not 'maybe, perhaps or possibly' and the epistemic adverb 'ke neng' usually cannot be used in a question.

Ⅲ. 'Ke neng' in historical Chinese and its proper annotations

From a cross-linguistic perspective, it is not difficult to find similar 'semantic' change from 'have the physical ability' to 'can' taking an epistemic semantic as 'can' in English (c.f. Traugott & Dasher 2002: 123). Bybee et al.(1994) regards 'ke neng' in Chinese as the similar phenomenon (c.f. Zhu, 2006). Usually an internal semantic change and grammaticalization can be traced in historical data to illustrate the gradual course and here a detailed search of the target word 'ke neng' in data will be indispensable to explain related issues.

As we have discussed above, there are three forms of 'ke neng' in Chinese and we refer to them respectively as 'ke neng'¹ (a quasi auxiliary verb juxtaposition with the meaning of 'can, have the physical ability to, or be able to'), 'ke neng'² (the question function word 'ke' + 'neng') and 'ke neng'³ (an epistemic sentential adverb still used in Putonghua).

In the data (a mass of ancient Chinese literature and Buddha scriptures) before Tang dynasty, no more than 20 examples of 'ke + neng' are found and are all 'ke neng'¹ (also c.f. Dong, 2011).

From Tang dynasty, 'ke neng'¹ are still in use but of a limited amount and the following are most of the examples:

- 5) 却后七日可能集会。(唐·义净译《根本说一切有部毗奈耶破僧事》，卷8)
(...) can gather together in 7 days. (Yijing's translation of Buddha scriptures in Tang dynasty)
- 6) 是身如聚沫，不可能摩撮。(《维摩诘经讲经文》)
This body is like bubbles and cannot be hold. (*The explanations of Wei Mo Jie Jing, in Tang dynasty*)
- 7) 清诚可以轨物，素行可能律人。(《全唐文》，卷23)
Refinement may instruct others and nobility can guide others. (*Quan Tang Wen, vol. 23*)
- 8) 圣人知孝之可能教人也。(同上，卷41)
The noble know that filial piety can direct common people. (ibidem, vol. 41)
- 9) 信可能娱乐惟灵。(同上，卷209)
(...) certainly can amuse the divinities. (ibidem, vol. 209)
- 10) 惟才与节，可能戡祸乱，定邦家。(同上，卷367)
Only ability and dignity can stop disasters and stabilize the country and families. (ibidem, vol. 367)
- 11) 取而按方合服之，一年可能乘云而行。(《太平广记》，卷4)
(...) take the prescription and take the medicines according to it, (...) can fly by cloud in 1 year. (*Tai Ping Guang Ji, vol. 4, in Song dynasty*)
- 12) 卒乃天下之事，无不可能。(明·王守仁《传习录》，卷上)

(Then) all the works in the world can be accomplished. (*Chuan Xi Lu* by Wang Shouren, vol. 1, in Ming dynasty)

- 13) 刀枪器械，无一可能胜吾者。(元明·罗贯中《三国演义》，87回)

Of knives or speary, or others, none can surpass mine. (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the 87th chapter, by Luo Guanzhong, in Ming dynasty)

- 14) 设渔团可能弭水盗，徙陆营可以垦荒地。(《湘报》，第95号)

To set up a group of fishermen can eliminate mobs at sea and moving out the troops on land can expend the plantation. (*Xiang Bao*, No. 95, in 1898)

In 14), 'ke neng' is in antithetical parallelism with 'ke yi 可以' and is of a plain usage of an auxiliary verb and in Putonghua there is no 'ke neng'¹ while 'ke yi' takes its place to mean 'can' and 'may'.

The use of 'ke neng'¹ in history is very limited and there is no sign of grammaticalization because a high frequency of use is the preface of grammaticalization and the semantic of 'ke neng'¹ is clear and certain. On the other hand, the reason that 'ke neng'¹ is not very commonly used in data is due to its identity as an auxiliary verb juxtaposition of 'ke' + 'neng' instead of a fixed word 'ke neng'.

'ke neng'², the question function word 'ke' + 'neng', is easy to detect from Tang dynasty as Jiang (1994) has pointed out and it is taken as the origin of 'ke neng'³ as Zhu has maintained above. But this is not the truth.

In Zhu's example 4), the 'ke neng' is a 'ke neng'² instead of 'ke neng'³. Besides Suzhou, Hefei and Kunming, 'ke neng'² is still in use in many dialects (c.f. Jiang, 1994) and in Xuyi dialect (the author's native language), the question function word 'ke' is very commonly used to express a general question and can proceed many verbs, including 'neng'; as a question function word, 'ke' has undergone a phonetic reduction to [k' ə?] ('ke' as a distinct word is pronounced as 'kě' in Pingyin). In Xuyi dialect, whether there is the question particle at the end of the sentence or not has not affected the usage and interpretation of the question function word 'ke' and the annotation of question function word 'ke' + 'neng' is 'Can + subject + predicate?' Zhu's argument is logically improper because the data as a whole may contain different corpus, including dialects, not only 'Putonghua'.

Now comes the question when does 'ke neng'³ (the epistemic sentential adverb) appears in Chinese? It is found numerously in late Qing dynasty (and can be used as an adjective, an adverb and a noun) 'all of a sudden' and 'ke neng xing 可能性', which had never appeared in native Chinese data, and 'bu ken eng 不可能', which seldom is in use, all can be found at the same time.

- 15) 甚至形迹稍涉可能生存者，亦逮捕入狱。(《论政府拟设检报局》，《东方杂志》，1905年第1期)

Even the less possible troublemakers are put into jail. (*On the government's plan to build an*

supervising bureau, in the Eastern Miscellany, vol. 1 in 1905)

- 16) 种族未消灭而欲以立宪之则, 不可能之事也。(蛰伸《论满洲虽欲立宪而不能》, 《民报》1905年第1号)

To establish a constitutionalism without getting rid of nationalism is impossible. (*On the impossibility of Manchu's intention to establish a constitution by Zheshen, in Minbao, vol.1, in 1905*)

- 17) 使用国际法上不可能之手段, …… (汉民《排外与国际法》, 《民报》1905年第9号)

Using an impossible method in international law …… (*Opposition to foreignness and international law by Hanmin, in Minbao, vol. 9*)

- 18) …… , 则条约可能取消。(汉民《排外与国际法》, 《民报》1905年第10号)

Then the treaty may be terminated. (*ibidem, in Minbao, vol. 10*)

- 19) 于支那分割之可能不可能, 未一言及之。(东京志同来稿, 《民报》, 第26号)

There is no any talk on the possibility and impossibility of the division of China. (*A contribution from a comrade in Tokyo, in Minbao, vol. 26*)

- 20) 并痛苦的觉得逃避是实际上不可能的。(张崧年《罗素与人口问题》, 《新青年》, 第7卷第4号)

And thinking in suffer that an escape is actually impossible. (*On Russell and demography by Zhang Songnian, in New Youth, vol. 7, No. 4*)

- 21) 能使可怕的事起来的可能性有多少, 你也不知道么? (日本武者小路实笃著、鲁迅译《一个青年的梦》, 《新青年》第7卷第2号)

Don't you know the possibility of terrible situation? (*A youth's dream by Saneatsu Mushanokōji, translated by Luxun, in New Youth, vol. 7 No. 2*)

- 22) 当然有供我们好好的去攻读、去评论的可能和必要。(罗香林《读钟著民间文艺丛话》, 《民俗》, 第29、30期合刊)

Certainly there is a possibility and a need for us to read and comment on it. (*A book review by Luo Xianglin, in the Folklore, No. 29 and 30, in 1928*)

In addition, there appear examples of a structure 'causative verb (shi, rang, etc.) + object + chengwei (成为) + ke neng', which is similar to 'make ... possible' in English:

- 23) 不可能的变为可能。(任鸿隽《何为科学家》, 《新青年》第6卷第3号)

The impossible becomes possible. (*What is a scientist by Ren Hongjun, in New Youth, vol. 6 No. 3*)

It is easy to find that all these 'ke neng'³ are used in modern magazines and newspapers that are of the distinct features of formality and are mostly translations. These new examples of 'ke neng' are of the epistemic semantic, different from 'ke neng'¹ and 'ke neng'².

Taking these new examples and the data into account, we are coming to a hypothesis that 'ke neng'³ might be a loan word from Japanese. In the above authors, Zheshen (Zhu Zhixin 朱执信), Hanmin (Hu Hanmin 胡汉民), Luxun (鲁迅), and Ren Hongjun (任鸿隽) all had studied

in Japan; Zhang Songnian (Zhang Shenfu 张申府) had studied in France; Luo Xianglin (罗香林), —though we are not sure whether he had been to Japan or not—had studied in an English school and had been a student of Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Wang Guowei (王国维) and it is very possible for Luo to get access to translated materials from Japan. This is the reason why 'ke neng' of new usage could only be traced in the data of new magazines and newspapers in late Qing dynasty.

In Japanese there is a word in characters written as '可能' and with a similar meaning. In Nihon Kokugo Daijiten, there is a clear annotation to 'ke neng': this word is a new created word in Chinese characters employed to translate 'virtual', 'possibility' (c.f. Dictionary of Philosophy edited by Inoue Tetsujiro, 1881). 'Ke neng' in Japanese (ka nou) is constituted of native Japanese words 'atau' and 'beki' and is interpreted as 'ata hu beki' meaning 'probably, maybe' and in Meiji period it is pronounced as 'ka nou' which is the pronunciation of Chinese characters 'ke可' and 'neng能'. It is a commonly adopted method to create new words for new terms by using native words to form new words and then pronouncing them in Chinese characters during Edo age (from Shen and Akitani Hiroyuki in personal exchange).

In Chinese there is rare inflection for many words to derive to different form classes and when 'ke neng' is taken to China people adjust it by abandoning the kana which is necessary in Japanese to indicate different usages of being an adverb, an adjective or a noun (Shen, 2010). As a result, 'ke neng' is in the same morphological form when used as an adverb, an adjective or a noun.

According to Shen (2010), besides a great number of words indicating new staff and new concepts from Japan to China in late Qing dynasty, there are loan words of other form classes as well, including verbs 'qūdi取缔', 'dǎxiāo打消', 'yǐndù引渡', and adjectives 'jījī积极', 'xiāoji消极', and phrases like 'wú ……zhī bìyào无……之必要' (meaning 'no need to……'). 'Ke neng'³ in this paper is not the unique one.

Wang Li (1988 : 681) has stated that the 'meanings' of some abstract concepts are always there in Chinese people's mind and 'ke neng'³ cannot be regarded as a loan word (An important proof of Wang Li's argument lies in the fact that in ancient Chinese data there are words which are almost in the same morphological form as 'ke neng'³).

Nevertheless what we have focused on is not the superficial form, but the usage of the morphological form, which has been clearly proved to be totally new and 'exotic'. The confusing point is its writing form in the same characters used in two languages and similar (but not the same) semantics.

When accepted in modern magazines and newspapers, 'ke neng'³ has found its way rapidly into common written language of native writers:

24) 这故事如今可能只有管渡船的老人还记住, 其他人全不知道。(沈从文《新湘行记》)

Maybe the story is only remembered by the old man in charge of the ferry-place now and the others don't know it at all. (*Xin Xiang Xi Ji* by Shen Congwen)

25) 可能有一天这上面会落下了敌人的一颗炸弹。(萧红《长安寺》)

Maybe someday it will suffer enemy's bombshells. (*Chang An Si* by Xiaohong)

Even for common people, 'ke neng'³ is also a frequent choice to express one's subjective evaluation of likelihood (an epistemic adverb). And people sometimes try to distinguish a loan word from native ones: in Xuyi dialect the 'ke' in 'ke neng'² has become to [k' ə?] whereas the 'ke' in 'ken eng'³ is pronounced as [k' ɔ].

Interestingly, with a foreign 'identity', 'ke neng'³ has obtained more functions (mentioned above) compared to other native epistemic sentential adverbs 'kongpa, dagai, yexu', etc., which is not the main theme of this paper.

IV. Conclusion

The current of Japanese words' flowing into Chinese is more dynamic than what we had imagined: not only nouns of new terms, but also loan words of different form classes; and it has stimulating effects in the disyllabic trend in modern Chinese (especially in written language), and deserves more attention for a deep and detailed inspection.

There are many disputes on the loan words between Chinese and Japanese. That is partly due to the fact that in ancient times Japan adopted Chinese characters and many words as well and when it comes to late Qing dynasty Japan use characters to create new words from western languages, which to Chinese people seem acquaint and lucid. In the field of linguistic research objective attitudes should be developed to this phenomenon by inspecting the issues from linguistic points of view, putting aside the writing form at the last place to consider for it is but the writing form, not linguistic words in use.

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