

A Study on the Expression of Time in Chinese: Focusing on Time Words of the Type “Noun+shang/xia”

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Abstract

Among the temporal words in Modern Chinese, there is a closed small class, namely, the temporal words in the pattern of “Noun+shang/xia”. After a diachronic investigation, this paper concludes that these words are the synchronic relics of different historical products, and their structure was fixed in the Qing Dynasty. There are two main reasons for the synchronic distribution pattern of these words: the metaphorical projection of the semantic features of directional words “shang” and “xia” during the process of disyllabic in Chinese, and the internal analogy within the language. The former is the main for the opposition between “Noun+shang” and “Noun+xia” within this class of temporal words, while the latter mainly affects the internal structure “Noun+shang” temporal words. Moreover, during the process of semantic feature projection, there is an asymmetry in the occurrence time of the basic core features and other semantic features of the directional words “shang” and “xia”, with the basic core semantic features occurring earlier and showing certain stubbornness in the of grammaticalization.

Keywords: temporal words, shang, xia, semantic features, metaphor

1. Introduction

There are a few time words in Modern Chinese that follow the pattern of “Noun+shang/xia”.

Currently, there are relatively few studies on these time words in the academic community. Lian Xuerui (2007) outlined the reasons for this asymmetry in combinations from the perspectives of cross-domain projection, usage

frequency, word formation ability, and cultural tradition. Lü Weiguang (2012) and Gao Zhiyong (2024) believed that “yanqian” and “yanxia” have undergone the process of spatial meaning to lexicalization time meaning.

The existing research covers a variety of perspectives, but there are still some issues that have not been addressed. First, the Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition) separately lists

the entry “indicates a certain time or season” under character “xia”, but does not include a similar usage for “shang”; Second, are there differences between “shang” and “xia” in “Noun+shang/xia” when they are used to indicate time?

This article combines the definitions previous scholars and dictionaries to select some time words in the “Noun+shang/xia” category that are commonly recognized as time words, namely, “zaoshang”, “wanshang”, “chunshang”, “wushang”, “jiexia”, “nianxia”, “shixia”, “yanxia” and “muxia”. Among them, “yanxia” and “muxia” belong to the structure of “body part noun+shang/xia”, and both have undergone the process of specific spatial meaning to lexicalization time meaning. Therefore, they are not included in this study. Unless otherwise specified, the materials used are from the Full-text Retrieval System of Chinese Classics and the Chinese Corpus of Peking University (CCL).

2. Examination of Temporal Words with “Noun+shang” Through Time

In the examination of the historical development of “zaoshang” and “wanshang”, it was found that there is a near-synonym “wanxia”, which is similar in meaning to “wanshang (晚上)”. For the convenience of writing and other reasons, it is placed in the section of temporal words with “Noun+xia” for explanation.

2.1 Historical Examination of “Zaoshang”

“Zaoshang” is first seen in Southern Song Dynasty southern documents, with the same meaning as today’s “morning”. For example, in *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, Volume 10: “Today I read it, tomorrow I read it again; in the zaoshang I read it, in the evening I read it again; before meals I read it, after meals I read it again, and after a long time, one naturally sees the opening, each character has a big crack.” In *Old Stories of Wulin*, Volume 7: “In the zaoshang, I sent the knowledge province to the official, respectfully inquired about the daily life of the two saints, and expressed my desire to personally go to the palace to express my gratitude.”

During the Yuan Dynasty, “zaoshang” still referred to “morning”, and it is often seen in Yuan dramas, especially those written or adapted by authors from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, such as *The Story of the Pipa*, Act 21: “I arranged some food for my parents-in-law to eat in the

zaoshang, and I would have bought some fish and vegetables, but I had no money to buy them.” The author Gao Ming was from Wenzhou, and the drama was adapted from a folk Nanxi opera. *The Story of Killing a Dog*, Act 14: “After sleeping all night, I sat on the bed in the zaoshang and called Chunxiang.” The author Xu Tianchen was from Chun’an, Zhejiang. However, there are also some works in Yuan dramas where the author is unknown, making it difficult to conclude, and therefore, it is temporarily omitted, that is, it cannot be directly concluded that “zaoshang” was only seen in Southern documents during the Yuan Dynasty.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, both northern and southern documents are seen, referring to “morning”. For example, in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Chongzhen edition) Chapter 55: “Dai’an said: ‘I have eaten since the zaoshang, I haven’t had lunch yet.’” In *The Journey to the West by the Eunuch Sanbao*, Chapter 21: “In the zaoshang, the court was set up, the officials paid their respects, and the imperial edict was left alone with the Chancellor Wei Zheng to play chess in the Wenhua Hall.” In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Chapter 20: “Baoyu laughed: ‘What should we two do? It’s a bit boring, but never mind, you said your head itched this zaoshang, now there’s nothing to do, let me comb your hair.’” In *The Tale of Heroes and Heroines*, Chapter 29: “So I said to Mrs. Zhang: ‘Mother-in-law, on that day, you and your husband will go to the daughter and son-in-law’s feast in the zaoshang, and I will prepare something to eat for you in the evening, I won’t take care of the father-in-law.’”

2.2 Historical Investigation of “Wanshang”

“Wanshang” first appeared in Yuan operas and dramas, synonymous with today’s “night”. For example, in *The Dream of the Butterfly* the first act reads: “I have quite bit of wealth, and my brother controls it. I study in the school, but I can’t sleep at wanshang, so I ponder the inevitability of and death.” Shi Jiu Shanren was from Yongqing, Hebei Province, in the early Yuan Dynasty.

“Wanshang” appears in both northern and southern literature during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and its usage shows an increasing trend. In *The World’s Warning*, Volume 24, it says: “For these six months, I have been reading books all day, and I read until the third watch of

the wanshang before sleeping, and I get up at the watch, until after breakfast, then I comb my hair." In *The Story of the Eunuch San Bao*, Chapter 32, the Prime said: "The mother of the treasure is like a beautiful stone, and every 15th of the month at wanshang, she is placed by the seaside and all the treasures gather, so she is called the mother of the treasure." In *The Case of Peng Gong*, Chapter 71, "It's too early today, I have an idea for this wanshang." In *The Marriage of Flowers in the Mirror*, Chapter 59, "Zi Xiao knew that Song Su had not committed any other serious crimes, so she promised to rescue her that wanshang. At that time, Du Jiugong still outside to take care of things."

2.3 Historical Investigation of "wushang" and "chunshang"

"Chunshang" is an oral word in modern Chinese, referring to spring. "wushang", referring to noon, has been completely replaced by "zhongwu" in modern Chinese. Both words appeared later and have a simple development thread, so they are explained together.

"Chunshang" as a time word meaning spring first appeared in southern literature in the Qing Dynasty. In *The Old Residual Travelogue*, Chapter 1, it says: "Last chunshang, my grandmother died, and the money was all gone." The author Liu E was from Dantu, Jiangsu Province (Zhenjiang City). In *Twenty Years of Strange Phenomena*, Chapter 87, it says: "There was a senior official in the capital who was from the South. Last chunshang, he took leave to visit his relatives, and he gathered a lot of public opinion in the Jiangnan area, finding both the military and financial administration were corrupt. After returning to the capital, he impeached them, with 18 charges against the military and 12 the finance. The emperor ordered a special envoy to investigate in Jiangnan." The author Wu Woyao was from Guangdong Province.

"Wu" as the seventh position of the Earthly Branches, which has long been used to record years, months, and times. It can refer to the time from 11 PM to 1 PM. For example, in *The Selected Writings-Sun Chuo-A Writing on Touring Tiantai Mountain*, it says: "At tingwu, sun is high in the sky, and the clouds are high." Li Shan commented: "Wu, the middle of the day." In the Song Dynasty, Chen Shidao wrote in *Climbing the Yellow Tower with Wei Yan on the Lantern Festival's Night*: "We stood together in silence, and the moonlight was approaching wu." Ren

Yuan commented "Wu, the middle of the night." The term "wu" specifically referring to noon appeared in southern novels in the Ming Dynasty. For example, *The Golden Lotus* (Chongzhen edition), Chapter 48, it says: "Xia old man said, 'I will come back at wushang.'" In *Boys and Girls*, Chapter 10, it says: "Xu Xuan went to bed and slept until the next wushang." Both authors were from Jiangsu Province. In Qing Dynasty, it appeared in both northern and southern literature. For example, in *The Present Situation in the Official World*, Chapter 22, it says "Who knew that he would have such a meal at wushang, and he would stay at the inn at night, and when it was time to leave, he definitely has to bow and send them off." The author was from Jiangsu Province. In *The Mirror of the Wind and the Moon*, Chapter 3, it says: "Yan Niang laughed and said, 'I will go to your house tomorrow, and you can invite me today, and I will return the at wushang.'" The author was from Henan Province.

3. Diachronic Investigation of Time Nouns in the Pattern of "Noun+xia"

3.1 Diachronic Investigation of "Wan Xia"

It was mentioned earlier that "zaoshang" first appeared in southern literatures of Song Dynasty, while "wanshang" first appeared in the works of the Yuan Dynasty. The two did not appear at same time, and there was a time difference. Moreover, during the search process, it was found that the term "wanxia" had already appeared before "zaoshang" and "wanshang", with a meaning roughly the same as today's "wanshang". All the exact examples were found in Dynasty poetry, and the authors were all from the north. For example, in the poem *The Second San Tai* by Wei Yingwu of the Tang Dynasty: "In the morning, the gate is quiet, in the wanxia, the high study is full of emotion." Wei Yingwu was from Chang'an (now Xi'an, Shaanxi Province). In *Sending Liu Servant* by Si Kongshu of the Tang Dynasty: "In the early morning, the new feathers and guards, in the wanxia, the steps are full of footprints." Si Kongshu was from Guangping Prefecture (now Yongnian County, Hebei Province). These poems indicate that "wanxia" has same status and part of speech as "in the morning" and "early morning", and can be considered as a word. At least, "wanxia" refers to a later part of the day relative to "morning".

However, the term "wanxia" was not found in

the literature from the Five Dynasties to the Northern Song Dynasty. In the Southern Song Dynasty, “wanxia” appeared in the southern literature. For example, in *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, there are 2 examples, such as in Volume 6: “Just like a day, the morning is clear, which is benevolence; the noon is very hot, which is propriety; the wanxia is gradually orderly, which is righteousness; and by the middle of the night, it had completely subsided, leaving no trace, which is wisdom.” This divides the day into “morning”, “noon”, “wanxia”, and “midnight”, clearly indicating that “wanxia” and “midnight” refer to different times, roughly from sunset to before midnight. In Volume 16: “*The Pan Ming* takes the meaning of bathing, because in the morning, washing is done, and by wanxia, dirt is generated again, it is necessary to renew oneself daily.” In this example, “morning” and “wanxia” are contrasted, and “daily renewal” is indicating that “wanxia” refers to a time close to the end of the day.

There are scattered examples in the literature of Yuan Dynasty. For example, in *Cai Bojie's Pipa Story*, Act 35: “Now in the wanxia, they will return home, and I can't help but sweep and clean the study, waiting for the master to return.” The author Gao Ming was from Ruian, Wenzhou, and this play was adapted by Gao Ming based on a southern drama. In *Ao Bo Tu*: “Every afternoon, the ashes are collected, and after the rain, the site is empty. In the wanxia, the water buckets are tied with, known as ‘zhao bucket’.”

There are more examples in the Ming Dynasty, but since the authors of some books are unknown, it is impossible to determine the areas where “wanxia” was popular. There is only one example that is definitely known to be written by a southern author. For example, *Yao Mountain Hall Miscellaneous*, Volume 2: “The emperor replied in a decree: ‘In the morning, we ascend and act together; in the wanxia, we return together like geese. We are wealthy, but we must not forget the state's orders.’” The author Jiang Yikui was from Wujin, located in Jiangsu Province.

There is only one known example in the Qing Dynasty, and it is from southern literature. For example, in *Remains of the Ash*, Chapter 2: “Liu said with a smile: ‘I will go and talk to him. I'm not afraid that Zhu will deny it, I'm here.’ After saying this, he indeed went. It wasn't until the

wanxia that he returned.” The author Wu Jianren was from Foshan (located in Guangdong Province) in the late Qing Dynasty.

3.2 Diachronic Investigation of “Shixia”

The term “shixia” developed a temporal concept relatively late, first appearing in Southern Song Dynasty literature, meaning “now” or “at present”. For example, in *Reply to Lü Ziyang*, it states: “If our hearts are truly open and honest, even if they are not pure in the shixia, they will eventually become pure.” The author was from Zhejiang.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the meaning of “now” for “shixia” remained the mainstream usage, visible in both northern and southern literature. For example, in the drama *Bao Daizhi San Kan Hu Die Meng*, it says: “Don't talk about how articles can help one stand firm. How we deal with the shixia financial difficulties? It's in vain to suffer in the cold window.” The author, Guan Hanqing, was from the North. A verse, “We understand the tricks of the musicians, who rely on their reputation to live. Let's focus on filling our bellies for shixia, and in a comfortable place.” The author, Sui Xuanming, was from Jiangsu. However, it also began to be used in retrospective contexts, referring a certain time in the past, as seen in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: “Cao Cao shouted, ‘Three years ago, we visited Cao E's tomb, but I didn't understand the meaning of the eight-character inscription at shixia. I asked you, but you didn't know either. It wasn't until dawn that I finally understood...’”

In the Ming Dynasty, the meaning of “now” for “shixia” continued to be used in northern and southern literature, but it also began to be used in novel narratives to mean “at that time” or to emphasize the brevity of time and speed of action. For example, in *Jing Shi Tong Yan*, Volume 24, it says: “The young master shixia changed into a simple turban and blue clothes, left the inspection office with his servant, hired two mules, and headed towards Hongtong County.” Here, “shixia” can be understood as “at that time.” In *Journey to the West*, Chapter 72, it says: “The women untied their upper clothes, revealing their bellies, and each showed magic: ropes as thick, as duck eggs spurted out from their waists, covering the entrance of the house in shixia.” Here, “shixia” emphasizes the brevity of time, meaning “immediately.”

In the Qing Dynasty, “shixia” was still visible in both northern and southern literature,

continuing the usage from the Yuan and Ming dynasties. In *The Marriage of Flowers in the Mirror*, Chapter 82, it says: "Chun Hui said, 'I have heard that shixia literati and scholars are fond of the game of double sounds and repeated rhymes, two characters share the same initial consonant, it is called double sound, such as smoke and cloud; when two characters share the same final, it is called repeated rhyme, such as east wind and melt wind.'" In *Rulin Waishi*, Chapter 46, it says: "Mr. Tang said, 'This gentleman is the best, but he has a poor sense of propriety and is fond of engaging in miscellaneous studies which has led him to neglect his main duties. Although Mr. Yu's pursuit of the imperial examinations is not a bad habit of shixia, his attempt to the style of the early Ming Dynasty is not a balanced practice.'" In both, "shixia" means "now." In *Xingshi Yinyuan*, Chapter 67, it says: "The husband and wife were fighting there, and Mi Han invited Zhao Xingchuan, sent gifts, and promised to promptly prepare medicine and clothing. They were ready to set off at shixia." Here, "Shi Xia" "immediately."

It is worth noting that although "shixia" later came to mean "a certain time in the past", "at that time", or "immediately", these meanings were derived from the basis of "now". Moreover, these meanings are more context-dependent, often seen in narrative texts in novels. Therefore, in the analysis of the word "shixia" in the following text, the emphasis is still on its meaning of "now".

3.3 Diachronic Investigation of "Jiexia"

The term "jiexia" originated in northern literature in the Yuan Dynasty, meaning "during the festival." For example, in the play *Cuihongxiang Reunion*, it says: "the 15th of the winter month, during the jiexia, I couldn't bear the cold and went to my deceased wife's grave to pour some wine as an offering, just like repaying an old drunkard." The author, Gao Maoqing, was from Hebei. In the play *Dongtang Old Persuades the Destitute Son*, it says: "Why should I bow? It's not the winter jiexia, what am I bow for?" The author, Qin Jianfu, was from Dadu (now Beijing).

It can be found in both southern and northern literature during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In Chapter 45 of *Outlaws of the Marsh*, it says: "It turned out that Hai Li often received lunch from his teacher, and during jiexia, he would take him

to recite scriptures, earning some money food and clothing." In Chapter 23 of *The Golden Lotus* (Chongzhen edition), it says: "Yueniang said, 'This is a bit unfair; if one person loses, it's not right. Our plan is the big jiexia, when each of us takes turns to prepare a feast, invites Yu Dajie, and plays in the evening, there is no harm.'" In Chapter 98 of *Twenty Years of Strange Sightings*, it says: "The governor said, 'I've had this person in mind for long time. Because I don't know his character, I need to investigate further, so I haven't given him any tasks yet. I just told my son invite him to correct the exam papers, and during the jiexia, I'll give him some jiexia gifts.'" In Chapter 34 of *Legend of Heroes*, it says: "The young master remembered a saying, and said, 'Last night I told you, during the jiexia, when making the mooncake filling for my parents remember to add more sugar.'"

3.4 Diachronic Investigation of "Nianxia"

The term "nianxia" began to appear in literature during Ming Dynasty, mainly in southern literature, meaning "the time of the New Year". For example, in *The Golden Lotus* (Chongzhen edition), Chapter 23: "Ximen Qing said, 'There's also the jar of jasmine flower wine that your father-in-law gave you during the nianxia. Open it and have a drink.'" In *Xingshi Yinyuan*, Chapter 84: "Ji Jie said, 'What a painting! Paint it during the nianxia and paste it on the door.'"

It can be seen in both northern and southern literature during the Qing Dynasty. In *Twenty Years of Strange Sightings*, Chapter 82: "Zhu Gou said, 'To be honest, we don't get paid. But during the nianxia, if the master is happy, he might give us some money for shoes and socks. If he's not happy, we get nothing.'" In *Legend of Heroes*, Chapter 30: "He said, 'It's a good point. I have to go out and thank some guests these days. Once this busy period is over, winter will be gone, and it will be nianxia.'"

4. The Analysis of "Noun+shang/xia" Type Temporal Words Distribution Pattern

As can be seen from the diachronic analysis of above words, the development and formation of today's "Noun+shang/xia" type temporal words are gradual, and these temporal words are the coexistence products from different historical layers. Moreover, this type of temporal words appeared relatively late, with the earliest occurrence in the Tang Dynasty, a rapid development period in the Yuan Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, and the basic distribution pattern

was established in the Qing Dynasty.

Table 1. Distribution of “Noun+shang/xia” Type Temporal Words in Different Dynasties

	zaoshang	wanshang	wanxia	chunshang	wushang	shixia	jiexia	nianxia
Tang	-	-	N	-	-	-	-	-
Nan Song	S	-	S	-	-	S	-	-
Yuan	S*	N	S	-	-	S、N	N	-
Ming	S、N	S、N	S*	-	S	S、N	S、N	S
Qing	S、N	S、N	S	S	S、N	S、N	S、N	S、N

Note: “S” and “N” respectively represent the time words of the category “Noun+shang/xia” that appeared in southern or northern in various dynasties. “S*” indicates that due to the limitations of the existing literature, it can only be temporarily determined that the word is more common in southern literature, which does not mean it only appears in southern literature.

4.1 Analysis of the Oppositional Pattern of “Noun+shang/xia” Time Words

In modern Chinese, “shang/xia” of “Noun+shang/xia” time words have undergone bleaching, with the weakening of its tone being one of the proofs. However, since these time words can form such a distribution pattern, it is not just a matter of bleaching that can explain it; we need to go back the source to get a glimpse of it.

Cognitive linguistics holds that the formation and development of vocabulary fundamentally related to human cognitive methods and thinking. In understanding the complex objective world, humans “seek close to the body, seek far from things”, thus forming a cognitive clue. That is, metaphorical projection is a universal means of semantic change and lexical development, and its projection path is from concrete cognitive domains to abstract domains. The prototype items such as “person”, “object”, “activity”, and “space” can all be conceptualized to metaphorize the category of “time”.

“Shang” and “xia”, from the perspective of oracle bone script, are originally typical directional words indicating the relative vertical positions of in three-dimensional space. That is, the basic core semantic features of “shang” and “xia” can be described as: “shang”: [+higher relative position]; “xia”: [+lower relative position]. Therefore, when indicating spatial positions, “shang” and “xia” must be used with concrete noun phrases to indicate specific position. ¹This means that no matter how they

are expressed in syntax, whether explicitly or implicitly, “shang” and “xia” will form a “Noun+shang/xia” structure when indicating spatial positions, and depend on the preceding noun. This usage, influenced by the basic core semantic features, can be referred to as basic core usage. Moreover, when indicating directional positions, influenced by the action of gravity, “shang” and “xia” have other semantic features (see Table 3), which together constitute the meaning of “shang” and “xia” in the spatial domain.

¹ Qi Huyang. (2014). *Cognitive Study of Modern Chinese Real*

Space. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 118.

Table 2.

shang	shang ₁	+High point in vertical coordinates, +No contact	xia	xia ₁	+low point in the vertical coordinate, +No contact
	shang ₂	+High point in three-dimensional space, +Contact		xia ₂	+Low point in three-dimensional space, +Contact/No contact
	shang ₃	+One-dimensional line/in a two-dimensional plane, +Contact, +carry		-	-

Note: The data is sourced from Qi Huyang's *Cognitive Study of Modern Chinese Real Space* (2014: 20-125), and is presented here in a list format based on semantic features.

As for time itself, there are no vertical or horizontal characteristics; people can either conceive of it horizontally or assume it to be vertical, which does affect our understanding of the essence of time.¹ That is to say, when time is perceived as a vertical entity, the vertical spatial words “shang” and “xia” can be used directly indicate the relative position of time through cross-domain metaphor. However, unlike space, time is invented to assist human production and life, with recording and distinguishing as important, thus the sequence of time is necessary.

Therefore, when “shang” and “xia” undergo metaphorical projection, based on the experience of the human body and the basic semantic features of their spatial domain, the semantic features first projected into the temporal domain are: “shang” is the beginning and prior of time, and “xia” is the end posterior of time, all of which have concrete meanings. Therefore, the meaning of “shang” and “xia” in the temporal domain is the earliest and most (examples of so-called “persistence” will be seen in the next part of the text). Accordingly, theoretically, their basic core usage in the temporal domain be expressed as “Noun+shang/xia”. However, once metaphorical projection occurs, although the target domain is influenced by the schematic

features of the source domain, it also develops independently, presenting its own characteristics. That is to say, different from the spatial domain, in the temporal domain, the initial word order of the “Noun+shang/xia” structure is “shang/xia+Noun”, for example, in *Zhou Li: Heavenly Officials: Chief Steward*: “In shangchun, the king wife leads the six palace women to sow the seeds of various grains and present them to the king.” “Shangchun” refers to the first month of spring, is based on the idea of spring as a vertically developing timeline, with “shang” being the beginning, so the first month of spring is called “shangchun”.

Later, with the development of changes in the objective world and within language, the basic core meanings of the directional words “shang” and “xia” were no longer sufficient to meet the needs. Their use in the temporal domain had become commonplace, so it was more easy to use existing words rather than introduce new ones. However, to distinguish them from the former, “shang” and “xia” were moved to the end of the phrase in the temporal domain, forming the structure “Noun+shang/xia” to express time. In this process, the other non-core meanings of “shang” and “xia” began to project and gradually took the dominant position. Initially, “Noun+shang/xia” was a loose structure. In summary, the relationship and differences between the structure “shang/xia+Noun” and the loose structure “Noun+shang/xia” are: First, “Noun+shang/xia” and “shang/xia+Noun” appeared at different

¹ Liu Lihong, Zhang Jijia. (2009). The Influence of Spatial Metaphors of Time on the Temporal Cognition of Native Chinese. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 41(4), 270.

times to express time, with a clear temporal sequence. Second, the positions of “shang” and “xia” in the temporal domain when paired with nouns are different, which causes the overall structure to have different meanings. For example, “shangchun” and “chunshang” have different meanings; the former is the first month of spring and come out earlier, while the latter is spring itself and emerged later. The change in the position of “shang” has caused a change in the overall meaning. In the loose structure “Noun+shang/xia”, “Noun+shang” appeared earlier, probably in the Wei-Jin and the Nan-Bei Dynasty, as seen in the book *Essential Techniques for the Common People*, Volume 6: “When the qiushang seeds are ripe, collect them and scatter them in the pond, and they will grow naturally.” Here, “qiushang” means the time of autumn, where “shang” is a metaphor for the spatial meaning of “carrying” in the temporal domain, viewing a year as a thread, with autumn being a point on it. The structure “Noun+xia” appeared in the Sui to Tang dynasty, slightly later than “Noun+shang”, as seen in *The Dunhuang Transformation Texts · The Story of Prince Siddhartha’s Renunciation*: “From the first obeisance to the nine hundred and ninety-ninth, and to the one on moxia, put down the tray of pearls.” Here, “moxia” means the end, where “xia” and “mo” both mean “the end”, forming a synonymous joint projection in the temporal domain. This also shows that when “shang” and “xia” are used after other entity nouns to express time, their appearance time and semantic projection have already shown obvious asymmetry.

The period when the time words of the type “Noun+shang/xia” were coined with the further development of the non-core metaphorical projections of spatial terms “shang” and “xia”, which contributed to the formation of the above distribution pattern. Specifically, since the spatial term “shang” itself carries the meaning of “shang₃”, the relationship between the target object and the reference in terms of support and being supported is more prominent, while the time point and time period are relative (meaning that although “chunshang” refers to a longer time than “zaoshang”, “zaoshang” is a time point relative to the daytime, while “chunshang” is a seasonal point relative to the year), therefore when time is conceptualized as a line or a plane, time terms which containing “shang”, like “zaoshang”, “wushang”,

“wanshang”, and “chunshang”, are metaphorically attached to the upper time line or plane as points (as shown in Figure 1). However, the spatial deictic “xia” does not have a corresponding “xia₃” meaning like “shang₃”, but rather emphasizes the spatial distance (as shown in Figure 2), which means that when it is metaphorically projected onto time, the regional characteristics are more prominent. For example, “shixia” refers to the present time, but from the perspective of psychology, “the present time” is not a “point”. In psychological tests, the duration of “the present time” for normal people is generally 1/6 of a second to 2~3 seconds.¹ “Shi” itself is a neutral time marker and does not have the ability to represent specific times, but “xia” emphasizes spatial distance, and when metaphorically applied to time domain, it emphasizes a certain time area. Therefore, “shixia” can be analyzed as a period of time around the time of speaking, especially to a small time area after it. Similarly, “nianxia” and “jiexia” focus more on expressing a period of time.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

4.2 Intra-Day Time Word Unary Class Analysis

4.2.1 A Review of the Use of “zao/wan+shang/xia” in Literary Examples

In the course of historical development, “zaoshang”, “wanshang”, and “wanxia” have certain particularities. Through a detailed

¹ Chen Zhenyu. (2007). *Cognitive Model and Operation of Time Systems*. Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 8.

combing of the examples from various dynastic literatures, here is a brief list of the usage

frequencies of the three words in different dynasties which is provided below for further.

Table 3. Usage of “zaoshang”, “wanshang”, and “wanxia” in Literature (Same usage counted as one example)

Literature												
Dynasty	Term	Poem	Literary theory	Speech genre	Yuan Qu	Story books	novel	Note	Medical literature	Agri-culture &Handi-craft Literature	Taoist literature	Total
Tang	zaoshang	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
	wanshang	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
	wanxia	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Southern Song	zaoshang	2	9	5	-	-	-	2	1	-	2	21
	wanshang	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
	wanxia	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	5
Yuan	zaoshang	-	-	-	13	1	-	-	-	-	-	14
	wanshang	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
	wanxia	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	2
Ming	zaoshang	-	1	-	-	-	40	-	2	-	-	43
	wanshang	-	-	-	-	-	89	-	-	-	-	89
	wanxia	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	1	-	1	7
Qing	zaoshang	-	-	-	-	-	153	-	-	-	-	153
	wanshang	-	-	-	-	-	926	-	-	-	-	926
	wanxia	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1

According to the above analysis and the data in the table, the order of the emergence of “zaoshang”, “wanshang”, and “wanxia” from earliest to latest is: wanxia > zaoshang > wanshang. “Wanxia” appeared the earliest, found in northern documents of the Tang Dynasty, its usage was extremely rare. However, its meaning was already clear, roughly referring to the “evening” at the end of the day as opposed to the “morning” at the beginning of the day. During the Southern Song Dynasty, “wanshang” had not yet appeared, but “zaoshang” and “wanxia” were found in southern documents, with “zaoshang” representing the “morning” at the beginning of the day. However, both were still in their budding and were used infrequently. In the Yuan Dynasty, “wanshang” emerged, found in northern documents, and was synonymous with “wanxia”. “Zaoshang” “wanxia” were still

mainly used in southern documents; these three terms were used concurrently in different regions at the same time, but their usage was still relatively rare. In the Ming Dynasty, both northern and southern language systems had the opposing pair “zaoshang” and “wanshang”, but “wanxia” still lingered in documents, although the usage of “wanshang” greatly exceeded that of “night”. During the Qing Dynasty, “zaoshang” and “wanshang” were in both northern and southern documents, the usage of “wanshang” increased rapidly, while “wanxia” gradually shrank and almost disappeared.

It also needs to be emphasized that, on the one hand, the meaning of “zaoshang” has never changed; “wanxia” has never changed in meaning from its inception to its near disappearance, and it is often used in contrast with words like “early morning” to refer to the

time sunset to late at night; “wanshang” has the possibility and tendency to mean “towards the late night” since its inception, as shown in the examples. On the other hand, in its early stages, that is to say, in the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties, “zaoshang” and “wanxia” only or mainly found in opposition in the southern literary system, and there was no “wanshang” in the southern literature. In the process of historical evolution, “zao/wan+directional words ‘shang/xia’” has formed different distribution patterns, but it has never formed the word “zaoxia”.

4.2.2 The Reason for the Formation of the Pattern

During the Tang Dynasty, the northern language system only produced “wanxia” as counterpart to “zhaolai” (morning). By the Southern Song Dynasty, southern literary works did not produce “wanshang”, but “zaoshang” and “wanxia” coexisted. This indicates that in the southern language system, the “shang” and “xia” in “zaoshang” and “wanxia” still retained their spatial meanings, directly indicating time. This is because the process of word formation, the internal combinations are not arbitrary. Especially in the case of cross-domain projection, the basic core semantic features of the source domain play crucial role, and are the first choice in the projection process. Even in the process of semantic bleaching, they still exert a counteracting effect.

In the Yuan Dynasty, “wanshang” and “wanxia” belonged to different northern and southern language systems, and their usage was still matched. In the Ming Dynasty, “wanshang” entered the southern language system, and “wushang” was also produced in the system. That is, in the southern language system of the Ming Dynasty, the forms representing the three important time points of the day were already uniform. Therefore, the principles of linguistic economy and analogy, “wanshang” triumphed over “wanxia” and became an active word, and later completely squeezed out the space “wanxia”. At this point, the “shang” in “wanshang” and “wushang” no longer had the direct projection property of the period (when “zaoshang” and “wanxia” were opposing), but was the result of further bleaching after the spatial word was projected into time domain. Therefore, the “shang” in “zaoshang”, “wushang”, and “wanshang” can be seen as a point marker, no longer having an internal connection or interaction with the preceding

word that carries the core meaning; specifically, the “shang” in “zaoshang” is a direct projection of the basic core semantic feature of the spatial word “shang”, while the “shang” in “wushang” “wanshang” is the result of the non-core semantic features of the spatial word “shang” being projected into the time domain to serve as a time marker.

Thus, the reason why “zaoxia” (evening) has never been formed in Chinese is fully revealed: First, the core semantic features spatial words are the first to be projected and have certain stubbornness, and “zaoxia” does not meet the requirements of direct projection and human cognitive habits. Second, the carrying characteristics of the spatial word “shang” and the regional characteristics of “xia” are the most distinct among their other semantic features, so other semantic features are projected, “zaoshang” still aligns with human’s primary cognitive habits.

5. Conclusion

This paper holds that the spatial words “shang” and “xia”, when projected into the temporal domain, have undergone changes from basic core metaphorical meaning to other metaphorical meanings, but the basic core metaphorical meaning still retains some stubbornness. The time words of the type “Noun+shang/xia” did not come into being overnight, but were produced relatively late, with the earliest ones dating back to the Tang Dynasty and becoming fixed only in Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty. They are the synchronous manifestation of different diachronic products. When expressing time, both “shang” and “xia” have the implicit meaning of “at the time of...”. However, the ontological semantic features first act on the direction of metaphorical projection, causing “shang” lean towards the relationship between the target time and the reference time, and “xia” tend to the expression of a time span. In addition, the internal of the language has ultimately led to the formation of different distribution patterns of words composed of “shang” and “xia” with nouns. Therefore, dictionaries should also the temporal meaning to the entry for “shang”. However, due to the limitations of time and energy, this paper still has some deficiencies, such as the failure fully examine the distribution characteristics of “shang” and “xia” in the non-lexical development stage after they were projected

into the temporal domain. Therefore, further investigation and explanation are needed in the future.

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