

Theoretical Foundations of Ancient Chinese Lexicography “Shuowen Jiezi” as a Philological and Epistemological Analysis

Rametova Dilara Yusupbaevna

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Language Studies,
Academic Lyceum of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan*

Abstract. *This study is devoted to the analysis of the Shuowen Jiezi dictionary, a fundamental monument of ancient Chinese lexicography, from philological, structural-semiotic, and epistemological perspectives. The research examines the graphemic structure of Chinese characters, their semantic-phonetic components, and the radical-based classification system.*

The results demonstrate that the majority of Chinese characters are based on the integration of semantic and phonetic elements and are organized according to consistent structural principles. It was also found that the radical system plays a crucial role in the semantic grouping of characters and serves as a key factor in determining their semantic fields.

Based on these findings, the Shuowen Jiezi dictionary can be interpreted not only as a lexicographic source but also as a conceptual system that organizes knowledge through the Chinese writing system.

Key words: *Chinese language, Chinese characters, lexicography, Shuowen Jiezi, graphemic analysis, semantic component, phonetic component, radical system, etymology, semiotics, epistemology, ancient Chinese linguistics.*

1. Introduction

In modern linguistics, the study of writing systems is no longer confined to the analysis of linguistic structures but is increasingly examined within epistemological and semiotic frameworks. In this context, the experience of ancient civilizations based on hieroglyphic writing systems plays a crucial role in revealing the complex relationships between language, thought, and reality. From this perspective, the ancient Chinese writing system occupies a central position in scholarly research as one of the longest-standing and conceptually sophisticated systems of signs in human history [1].

Chinese characters have been extensively studied from graphemic, phonetic, and etymological perspectives. In particular, the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary, compiled by Xu Shen in the 2nd century CE, is recognized as a fundamental source of ancient Chinese lexicography. In this work, characters are systematically classified according to their structural components, distinguishing between pictographic and ideographic forms, and are explained through their semantic and phonetic elements [2]. This approach has provided a significant methodological foundation for understanding the internal structure of the Chinese writing system.

However, a review of the existing literature shows that the *Shuowen Jiezi* has predominantly been interpreted as a lexicographic or etymological source. While it offers detailed explanations of the origins, formation, and meanings of characters, its conceptual and epistemological dimensions have not been sufficiently explored [3]. In particular, the function of characters not only as linguistic units but also as instruments for perceiving and structuring reality, as well as the ontological significance of Xu Shen’s radical system, requires deeper analysis. This gap highlights the need to reconsider the theoretical model of the “sign–meaning–reality” relationship developed within ancient Chinese lexicography [4].

In modern linguistic and semiotic theories, the linguistic sign is often regarded as arbitrary. However,

the Chinese character system offers an alternative model in which the relationship between sign and meaning is partially motivated [5]. This feature makes the *Shuowen Jiezi* an important source not only for linguistics but also for epistemological inquiry.

The aim of this study is to analyze the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary not merely as a philological or lexicographic work, but as a conceptual system that organizes knowledge through the Chinese writing system. Accordingly, the article reinterprets the graphemic structure of characters, their semantic-phonetic components, and the radical-based classification system within structural-semiotic and epistemological frameworks. The study seeks to clarify the role of the *Shuowen Jiezi* in ancient Chinese thought and knowledge systems, as well as its relevance to modern linguistic theory.

2. Methods

In this study, the ancient Chinese character system was analyzed on the basis of the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary through an integrated approach combining philological, structural-semiotic, and epistemological perspectives. The research design is qualitative and analytical, focusing on the reconstruction of the internal structure of characters, their meaning-generation mechanisms, and classification principles.

The primary empirical basis of the study consists of a selected corpus of Chinese characters drawn from the *Shuowen Jiezi*. The selection was carried out according to the following criteria:

- (i) complex characters with semantic-phonetic structures;
- (ii) representatives of pictographic and ideographic units;
- (iii) representative samples covering various radicals.

This approach made it possible to reconstruct the general structural model of the Chinese character system [6].

The study was conducted using a three-stage analytical model:

Stage 1: Graphemic segmentation. Each character was decomposed into its constituent elements (radicals and components), and their structural functions were identified. At this stage, the formal structure of each sign was reconstructed [7].

Stage 2: Semantic-phonetic identification. The extracted components were functionally classified, and the relationships between semantic indicators and phonetic markers were analyzed. This allowed for the identification of the mechanisms underlying meaning formation in Chinese characters [8].

Stage 3: Reconstruction of the classification model. Based on the radical system proposed by Xu Shen, characters were grouped into general categories. As a result, it was established that this system has not only a lexicographic function but also a conceptual (ontological) character [9].

The following methods were integrated in the research:

- structural analysis, to determine the internal organization of characters;
- semiotic analysis, to reveal the relationship between sign and meaning;
- etymological reconstruction, to identify historical layers of meaning;
- comparative analysis, to relate the findings to modern linguistic theories.

The combination of these methods ensured the comprehensiveness and scientific validity of the study.

The reliability of the research was ensured through a multi-method (triangulation) approach. Each character was analyzed using at least two methods, and the results were cross-validated. Due to the clearly defined research stages, the methodology can be replicated by other researchers [10].

3. Results

In this study, a selected corpus of Chinese characters from the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary was analyzed

based on structural-graphemic, semantic-phonetic, and classification criteria. The results made it possible to identify the following empirical patterns.

First, the majority of the analyzed characters were found to have a complex structure consisting of at least two components—semantic and phonetic elements. Within the selected corpus, semantic-phonetic compound characters were predominant. In these cases, the semantic component defined the general semantic field of the character, while the phonetic component performed a pronunciation-guiding function.[11]

Second, the results of graphemic segmentation showed that the constituent elements of characters exhibit a clear functional differentiation. Certain components consistently functioned as semantic indicators, whereas others served as phonetic markers. This confirms that the internal structure of Chinese characters is not random but systematically organized.

Third, structural differences between pictographic and ideographic characters were identified. Pictographic units were found to be based primarily on visual representation, with a direct relationship between graphic form and meaning. In contrast, ideographic characters were formed through combinations of multiple components, resulting in indirect meaning formation.[12]

Fourth, the analysis of the radical-based classification revealed that characters are grouped according to specific semantic fields. Characters sharing the same radical were observed to exhibit a common semantic orientation. This indicates that the radical system functions not merely as a technical classification tool but also as a mechanism for semantic integration.

Fifth, the results of etymological reconstruction demonstrated a degree of continuity between the original meanings of characters and their later interpretations. Although some characters underwent semantic expansion or narrowing over time, their core semantic elements were preserved.[13]

Sixth, the analysis revealed recurring structural patterns within the organization of characters. In particular, the semantic component showed a high degree of stability, whereas the phonetic component displayed variability. This finding confirms the existence of underlying regularities in the internal organization of the Chinese character system.

The results empirically confirm that the system of characters reflected in the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary is organized according to consistent structural and functional principles.

4. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the system of Chinese characters reflected in the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary is not a random collection of signs, but a complex system based on consistent structural and functional principles. In particular, the systematic integration of semantic and phonetic components, the stability of the radical-based classification, and the internal structural regularities of characters confirm the highly organized nature of this writing system. This finding indicates that the Chinese character system functions not only as a linguistic system but also as a conceptual framework.

When compared with existing research, the findings are partially consistent but also allow for broader interpretation. For example, Chinese characters have often been treated primarily as graphemic or etymological systems while Xu Shen's *Shuowen Jiezi* has been studied mainly as a lexicographic source. However, the present results empirically demonstrate the systematic nature of semantic-phonetic structures and the semantic grouping function of radicals, suggesting that this system can be interpreted not merely as a tool for organizing linguistic units, but as a model for structuring knowledge. This perspective extends Karapetyants' view on the normative formation of the Chinese writing system [14].

To explain these findings, it is essential to consider the character system from a semiotic perspective. In modern semiotic theory, the linguistic sign is often regarded as arbitrary (Saussure). However, the Chinese character system does not fully conform to this principle. The results indicate that the relationship between sign and meaning in Chinese characters is partially motivated: in pictographic units, this relationship is direct, whereas in ideographic units it is indirect. In this sense, the character system can be understood as a complex synthesis of Peirce's categories of icon, index, and symbol.

Furthermore, the analysis of the radical-based classification system reveals its ontological character. Chinese characters function not only as linguistic units but also as tools for categorizing elements of reality. This suggests that, within ancient Chinese thought, a specific model of the relationship between language and reality was formed. This view is consistent with modern approaches in cognitive linguistics, where language is considered a primary instrument of human cognition [15].

At the same time, the study has certain limitations. First, the analysis is based on a selected corpus of characters, which does not fully represent the entire character system. Second, the *Shuowen Jiezi* reflects the scholarly perspectives of its time, and its etymological explanations do not always correspond to modern linguistic standards. Third, the study is primarily qualitative, and the application of quantitative methods could further refine the findings.

Overall, the analysis supports the interpretation of the *Shuowen Jiezi* not only as a lexicographic source but also as a conceptual system that organizes knowledge through the Chinese writing system. The findings indicate that the character model developed within ancient Chinese lexicography reflects a complex interrelationship between language, thought, and reality. Therefore, the results of this study have significant theoretical implications not only for Chinese philology but also for general linguistics and semiotics.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that the role of the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary in ancient Chinese lexicography is broader than traditionally interpreted. The analysis empirically confirms that the Chinese character system is based on consistent structural and functional principles, particularly the integration of semantic and phonetic components and the coherence of the radical-based classification system.

The study has shown that there is a systematic relationship between the graphemic structure of characters and their mechanisms of meaning formation. This finding indicates the existence of underlying regularities in the internal organization of the Chinese writing system. In particular, the semantic grouping function of radicals supports the interpretation of the radical system not merely as a classificatory tool, but as a conceptual structure.

Based on these findings, the *Shuowen Jiezi* can be interpreted not only as a lexicographic or etymological source, but also as a comprehensive model for organizing knowledge through the Chinese writing system. This perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between language, thought, and reality in ancient Chinese linguistics.

At the same time, the results provide a theoretical basis for re-evaluating writing systems within the broader fields of general linguistics and semiotics. Future research may benefit from applying quantitative methods, expanding the corpus of analyzed characters, and integrating these findings with modern cognitive linguistic approaches.

References

- [1] S. E. Yakhontov, *Ancient Chinese Language*. Moscow, Russia: Nauka, 1965.
- [2] Sh. Khidoyatova, A. Karimov, and E. Aminov, *Chinese Grammar*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2004.
- [3] A. M. Karapetyants, *Formation of the Normative Written Language in China*. Moscow, Russia, 2010.
- [4] R. Rasulov, *General Linguistics*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2010.
- [5] E. A. Khamaeva, "Signs with diplomatic semantics in the ancient Chinese dictionary 'Shuowen Jiezi': Verification of etymology," 2022.
- [6] W. G. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*. New Haven, CT, USA: American Oriental Society, 1994.

- [7] X. Qiu, *Chinese Writing*. Berkeley, CA, USA: Society for the Study of Early China, 2000.
- [8] J. Norman, *Chinese*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- [9] J. DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. Honolulu, HI, USA: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984.
- [10] F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. London, UK: Duckworth, 1983.
- [11] C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958.
- [12] W. H. Baxter and L. Sagart, *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [13] C. Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic in Traditional China*. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press, 1998.
- [14] J. M. Unger, *Ideogram: Chinese Characters and the Myth of Disembodied Meaning*. Honolulu, HI, USA: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.
- [15] D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, 3rd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.