

A Sociolinguistic Study on the Evolution of the Meaning of “Migrant Workers”

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Abstract—The emergence of the surplus agricultural labor force employed in the secondary and tertiary industries in rural areas, the registered agricultural population engaged in business and the agricultural labor force has contributed to the continuous extension of the meaning of the term "migrant workers". The evolution of the meaning of "migrant workers" is the change of language promoted by the development of migrant workers through the economic principle and metonymy mechanism.

Keywords—“migrant workers”; word meaning; evolution; sociolinguistics

I. INTRODUCTION

After the reform and opening up, farmers have been leaving their land to seek a new way out in succession, and the term "migrant workers" came into being. According to Lu Xueyi's research, the term "migrant worker" first proposed in 1984 by Prof. Zhang Yulin of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in his "Sociological Research release". [1] As a matter of fact, as early as 1980, "migrant worker" was used in People's Daily to refer to the rural population who work in cities. On August 19, 1980, in the second edition of "Why Does the Labor Force in Changzhou City Seem Insufficient", the term "migrant worker" appeared four times, all referring to workers with agricultural household registration who work in cities. In 1987, this expression was included in "New Word, New Language and New Meaning" edited by Shen Mengying [2]¹⁵². In 2006, "migrant workers" appeared in the "Opinions of the State Council on Solving the Problem of Migrant Workers", indicating that this reference was solidified in the form of government documents. Scholars have paid attention to this appellation, mainly discussing the definition of migrant workers, their identity definition, the historical evolution of the appellation of migrant workers, discrimination, and the causes of the appellation of "migrant workers", etc. from the perspective of sociology. However, the change of the meaning of the expression "migrant workers" and its reasons and mechanisms are rarely involved. This paper intends to explore the development, dynamics and mechanism of the

term "migrant workers" from the perspective of sociolinguistics.

II. THE EXTENSION OF THE MEANING OF "MIGRANT WORKERS"

The definition of "migrant workers" in the "Modern Chinese Dictionary" is "farmers who work in cities". This undoubtedly covers the main types of current migrant workers, but with the development of social economy, the number of migrant workers increases and the scope of reference also expand. There are three main types of people involved.

A. Surplus Agricultural Labor Force Employed in Secondary and Tertiary Industries in Rural Areas

The paper "Social Network and Social Status of Migrant Workers" divides migrant workers into rural migrant workers and urban migrant workers according to their employment place. [3]⁴⁷ The monitoring survey reports of migrant workers over the years also divides migrant workers into two categories of local migrant workers and outgoing migrant workers. "Local migrant workers refer to migrant workers who work within the township area of their household registration." "Outgoing migrant workers refer to those who work outside the township where they are registered." And outgoing migrant workers include migrant workers in cities. Obviously, migrant workers in cities are only a part of migrant workers and a considerable part of them work in rural areas, including migrant farmers employed by township enterprises and various service industries. People's Daily refers to these workers as also "migrant workers". Examples are as follows.

- (1) *Huang Huaying, a returned migrant worker from Sanguansi Township in Cili County, Zhangjiajie City, Hunan Province, who was employed as an instructor in the scenic spot of the Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon took tourists on a tour, Feb. 11, 2018. Huang Huaying is one of 17 migrant workers who have returned home to Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon Scenic Spot... (4th edition, 13 February 2009)*

- (2) *Every year, 270,000 people in Changzhi City are invested in afforestation project construction, which solves the employment problem of 34,000 migrant workers returning home. The per capita income of migrant workers participating in the project construction is more than 3,000 yuan, so this arrangement not only completes the afforestation task, but also increases the income of farmers. (8th edition, 20 August 2009)*
- (3) *On the morning of the 3rd day this month, he was transforming his three brick houses into a farmhouse restaurant along with hired migrant workers. (5th edition, 7 February 2010)*

These migrant workers have agricultural household registration, but they are active in the tourism, greening and construction industries in the countryside, and earn wage income with their own labor. Different from migrant workers in the general sense, they did not go to cities, but it cannot be denied that they belong to the group of migrant workers.

B. The Registered Agricultural Population Engaged in Business

Migrant workers are mainly migrant workers that are employed, but instead of being hired, some of them earn a living independently by working as food and beverage vendors, tailors or water and electricity repairmen, etc. According to Li Peilin, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, migrant workers also include the rural population who go to cities to engage in individual business activities and in terms of occupation, they are self-employed. [4] This group has also been mentioned in survey reports on migrant workers over the years. For example, in the "Report on Monitoring Survey of Migrant Workers in 2009", "Among outgoing migrant workers, 93.6% are employed, 6.4% are self-employed, and the proportion of self-employed is 0.5 percentage points lower than that of the previous year".

When People's Daily talks about this group, it sometimes refers to "migrant workers" as well as "off-farm work" and "doing business", and "off-farm work" and "doing business" are in juxtaposition. Examples are as follows.

- (4) *In recent years, the number of rural migrant workers working in cities is increasing day by day. The number of migrant workers working in cities and doing business in 2004 alone reached 140 million, which is really amazing in scale. (13th edition, 6 April 2007)*
- (5) *Urbanization, industrialization and agricultural modernization with Chinese characteristics have been accelerated. At present, 225 million rural residents in China are engaged in business, and migrant workers have become an important part of industrial workers. (6th edition, 11 September 2009)*

Sometimes, they are directly called "agricultural industrial and commercial household", in which case the characteristics of migrant workers in business are more obvious. Examples are as follows.

- (6) *With the 10 mu of land collectively provided by the village, and the 700,000 yuan raised by villagers to buy shares, the first small commodity wholesale market in Guizhou was established. It is this batch of pioneering agricultural industrial and commercial household that makes the collective economy and individual economy a win-win. (11th edition, 19 January)*
- (7) *The Center of Small-sum Guaranteed Loan, Human Resources and Social Security Bureau of the Wolong District, Nanyang City, Henan Province and the Rural Credit Union joined hands to launch the "joint guaranty loan" — agricultural industrial and commercial household can apply for loan in the condition of the five-household joint guaranty. (18th edition, 18 April 2011)*

It can be seen that, in practice, migrant workers do include population of registered agricultural households engaged in small-scale business, mainly small vendors with division of labor and cooperation among family members, individual owners with a small number of employees, etc., while those who have been converted into private business owners are not included.

C. The Agricultural Labor Force

In the "2006 Research Report on Migrant Workers in China" by the Research Office of the State Council, the explanation of "migrant workers" still remained "mainly engaged in non-agricultural industries" and "employment in secondary and tertiary industries". [5]¹ However, with the large-scale management of rural land and the development of agricultural industrialization, the class of hired workers engaged in agricultural production has emerged, and they are also members of migrant workers. The most representative is the vast flood of cotton picker into Xinjiang every year. According to the "Report on Monitoring and Investigation of Migrant Workers in 2015" and "Report on Monitoring and Investigation of Migrant Workers in 2016", very few migrant workers are engaged in the primary industry, accounting for 0.4% in both two years. People's Daily paid close attention to this group in time. Examples are as follows.

- (8) *The eight counties in southern Ningxia organized a large number of migrant workers to help local farmers pick wolfberry in Zhongning County, which not only solved the pressing need of Zhongning County for farmers, but also increased the income of farmers in mountain areas. (2nd edition, 20 July 2004)*
- (9) *This year, a total of 515,500 migrant workers in Gansu province entered Xinjiang, and the total income of labor services exceeded 1 billion yuan for the first time, reaching 1.038 billion yuan, an increase of 368 million yuan over last year. Cotton picking in Xinjiang has become one of the main ways to export labor services and increase farmers' income in Gansu province. (4th edition, 13 December 2007)*

At present, the scale of such agricultural employment is relatively small, and the work is temporary, seasonal and has high personnel mobility. Another kind of agricultural workers has been mainly living on their work for agricultural enterprises, and they have become as agricultural workers in reality. Examples are as follows.

(10) *According to the introduction of Feng Wanlin, party branch secretary of Sangu Professional Cooperative of Edible Fungus, the company and the base have recruited a total of 800 local migrant workers to work all year round... (6th edition, 6 June 2013)*

(11) *On the 28th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar, Liu Yang, head of the Farmer Planting Professional Cooperative in Yuanshui Village of Qianxi County, carried 450,000 yuan to the fields and paid the salaries to migrant workers on the spot. (22nd edition, 6 March 2017)*

Although it is generally believed that migrant workers are engaged in secondary and tertiary industries, workers with rural household registration who are employed by various economic organizations but still engaged in agricultural production can hardly be excluded from the category of migrant workers [6]. They are also members of the group of migrant workers.

The common ground for surplus agricultural labor force employed in the rural secondary and tertiary industries, the registered agricultural population engaged in business and the agricultural labor force is that they have agricultural registered permanent residence, but mainly work or business for a living. The work includes the work in the secondary and tertiary industries as well as the primary industry as a hired hand, and business refers to individual business activities in urban and rural areas. The addition of these three parts greatly expands the extension of "migrant workers". The increase of conceptual content is always accompanied by the decrease of original semantic features of words. The expanded "migrant worker" can be described as [+ agricultural household registration] [+ working/doing business]. "Agricultural household registration" becomes its distinguishing feature, which also becomes the last and core difference between this group and the citizens.

III. THE CAUSE AND MECHANISM OF THE MEANING EVOLUTION OF "MIGRANT WORKER"

The change of the meaning of "migrant workers" is mainly driven by the expansion of migrant workers. In the process of category expansion, economic principle and metonymy mechanism play an important role.

A. The Development and Expansion of Migrant Workers

Appellation words are used in the society, so the root of appellation change lies in the social change. After the reform and opening up, the group of migrant workers has developed rapidly. The employment areas and industries have been widened, and the employment methods have increased, resulting in the emergence of surplus agricultural labor force

employed in the rural secondary and tertiary industries, the registered agricultural population engaged in business and the agricultural labor force. They need words for appellation. In this case, the existing vocabulary system must be adjusted. Usually, there are two ways to name new things. One is to create new words to express new concepts with new forms, and the other is to use old words to give new content to old words. "Migrant workers" is specially created to express the identity of farmers, and then the scope of "migrant workers" has been expanded again and again, used to express the surplus agricultural labor force employed in the rural secondary and tertiary industries, the registered agricultural population engaged in business and the agricultural labor force, which is a typical neology. Each expansion of "migrant workers" is result of group development, in which circumstance new members emerge and the original vocabulary cannot adapt to the new communication needs. The original relation between name and reality is thus broken and a new form and content matching system is constructed. Therefore, satisfying communicative needs is the direct cause of the meaning extension of the appellation words of migrant workers, and the development of migrant workers is the power source of the change.

B. Economic Principle

The French linguist Martinet first clearly put forward the principle of "economy of language". "Economic principle is the law governing people's speech activities, which enables people to consciously or unconsciously make economic arrangements for the consumption of power in speech activities on the premise of guaranteeing the completion of the communicative function of language." [7]²¹¹ The economic principle requires language to express the most abundant content with the least input. "Extension of meaning is a very economical way to add new words, which is much cheaper than creating a new word out of thin air" [8]¹²⁷. As far as appellation is concerned, extending the meaning of old words to represent new things can implement the task of assigning names to new things without increasing vocabulary or memory burden. And there is often a connection between the old and the new meaning, which allows people to grasp the new meaning more quickly. It is for this reason that after the reform and opening up when the group of migrant workers and businessmen developed rapidly and more and more new members joined in, the scope of "migrant workers" was frequently expanded, so as to realize the combination of reference form and concept with the lowest cost.

C. Metonymy Mechanism

Metonymy is to make use of the proximity and relevance between two related cognitive domains (belonging to the same cognitive model) and transition from the cognitive domain with high degree of significance to the cognitive domain with relatively low degree of significance." [9]³⁰⁹ Proximity and significance are two essential features of metonymic cognition. Among migrant workers with agricultural household registration, migrant workers in cities are the mainstream, with enough significant degree naturally. Therefore, the term "migrant workers" can be used to refer to

the surplus agricultural labor force employed in the secondary and tertiary industries in the countryside. Among the surplus agricultural labor force, workers are the main body, and their title "migrant workers" is representative. Therefore, self-employed workers can be included in its scope. And agricultural workers, although engaged in the primary industry, are workers with agricultural household registration, and can thus be referred to as "migrant workers" as well. The original meaning of "migrant worker" is related to its extended meaning in terms of agricultural household registration and employment mode, while there are differences in their labor region, form and industry. The object of the original meaning is large in scale and high in significance, so it can naturally refer to the social members who are closely connected with it.

IV. CONCLUSION

Behind the numerous and complicated language changes, there is always a thread pulling, which is the chances of the society. Language is attached to society. The change of social structure brings about the adjustment of language structure, and the change of language reflects the development of society. The expansion of migrant workers makes the original vocabulary unable to meet the needs of communication, and promotes the meaning of the word "migrant workers" to expand from the original "farmers who work in cities" to the surplus agricultural labor force employed in the secondary and tertiary industries in rural areas, the registered agricultural population engaged in business and the agricultural labor force. In this process, the role of social factors is realized through the economic principle of the language system itself and the operation of metonymy mechanism.

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