

Even Words Are Right, Odd Ones Are Odd: Explaining Word Segmentation Inconsistency among Chinese Readers

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When asked to segment a sentence into words, Chinese readers often show substantial between-individual as well as within-individual inconsistencies. Some researchers have attributed this word segmentation inconsistency to the fact that the character is the stable linguistic unit in the Chinese mental lexicon, and the word is not. Chen (1994) observed that his subjects had a tendency to treat the combination of a monosyllabic word and a disyllabic word as a single word. He characterized this tendency as "overextension of monosyllabic words," and suggested it might be the cause of the word segmentation inconsistency. The present study attempted to confirm this observation by means of experiments. The subjects were asked to draw a line between words in several short texts. The critical part of each text consisted of two words which could be paraphrased in two ways: a monosyllabic word and a disyllabic word, or two disyllabic words. Experiment 1 compared the monosyllabe-disyllabe combination with the disyllable-disyllable combination. Experiment 2 compared the disyllable-monosyllable combina-

tion with the disyllable-disyllable combination. The results showed that the monosyllabe-disyllabe combination and the disyllable-monosyllable combination did have a higher probability of being treated as a single word than the disyllable-disyllable combination. The Chinese language has evolved into a multi-syllabic language with most words consisting of two syllables/characters. We think the overextension tendency in our subjects' word segmentation behavior reflected the application of their implicit knowledge about this characteristic of the language in an explicit linguistic task that required metalinguistic knowledge. Several early-days Chinese scholars have discussed this tendency before, and Jin Zhao-Zi characterized it the best: "Even words are right, odd ones are odd." In line with this view, we conclude that the word is a psychologically real and stable unit in the Chinese mental lexicon, and that the reading unit in Chinese should be word.

Keywords: *word segmentation, reading unit, Chinese.*

