

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORDS “EACH OTHER” IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article analyzes the synonymous relationship of the Chinese words 彼此 (bǐcǐ), 互相 (hùxiāng), and 相互 (xiānghù), which express the meanings of “each other” and “mutual” in Chinese. In the course of the study, the semantic, grammatical, and stylistic features of these lexical units were examined on a comparative basis. The part-of-speech affiliation of each word, their syntactic functions within sentences, and their usage in discourse were illustrated through authentic examples. The article has practical significance for learners of Chinese, as it helps develop the ability to distinguish synonymous words accurately and use them appropriately in context.

Keywords

synonymy, Chinese language, 彼此, 互相, 相互, lexical-semantic analysis, stylistics, syntax.

INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, the phenomenon of synonymy is considered one of the essential elements reflecting the lexical richness of a language. In particular, the Chinese language is characterized by a wide range of synonymous units that convey similar meanings but differ in grammatical structure and stylistic features. A thorough study of such synonyms is of great importance for learners of Chinese as a foreign language, since incorrect usage may lead to speech errors and semantic ambiguity.

The words 彼此, 互相, and 相互 are among the most actively used synonymous units in Chinese that express the meanings of “each other” and “mutual.” They are widely employed in both every day and formal discourse. Although these words share a common semantic core, they differ in terms of part-of-speech classification, syntactic functions, and stylistic coloring. Therefore, the

main objective of this article is to identify the similarities and differences among these units and to establish criteria for their correct usage in speech.

The presence of synonyms in a language contributes to expressive and elegant speech. The study of synonyms is particularly important at the initial stages of language learning. Analyzing the similarities and distinctions of commonly used synonymous words in modern Chinese helps prevent confusion and misuse in communication.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The issue of studying synonyms in Chinese has been investigated by many linguists. In the work *Synonyms of the Chinese Language* by Wang Shuo and Mou Shuyuan, the grammatical features of 彼此, 互相, and 相互 are presented comparatively. This source provides clear explanations of their part-of-speech classification and syntactic functions, supported by concrete examples.

In *Discrimination of Near-Synonyms in Chinese* by Yang Xuemei, particular attention is paid to subtle semantic distinctions among synonyms. The author emphasizes that 互相, as an adverb, is more characteristic of spoken language, whereas 相互, functioning as an adjective, is widely used in formal and literary styles. In *A Comparative Study of the Usage of 1700 Pairs of Near-Synonyms* by Yang Jizhou and Jia Yongfen, the usage boundaries, compatibility with the structural particle 的, and stylistic features of these synonyms are analyzed comparatively.

Additionally, reference works such as *A Handbook for Learning Chinese Near-Synonyms* and *A Dictionary of Chinese Near-Synonyms* provide detailed explanations of the collocational properties, permissible word combinations, and discourse functions of 彼此, 互相, and 相互. These sources serve as the primary theoretical and methodological foundation for the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Both 彼此 and 互相 express identical actions performed reciprocally by two parties:

我们彼此/互相都很了解对方。

We understand each other very well.

When analyzing the differences among these words, it should be noted that 彼此 belongs to the class of pronouns and functions as a subject when placed before the verb:

相处久了, 彼此居然可以从表情、声音和行为举止中了解对方的意思。

After living together for a long time, they were able to understand each other's intentions through facial expressions, voice, and behavior.

The word 互相, functioning as an adverb, precedes the verb and is indirectly connected to the subject:

好朋友应该互相帮助。

Good friends should help each other.

The pronoun **彼此** can also function as an object or an attributive modifier:

我们是最好的朋友，不分彼此。

We are best friends and inseparable from each other.

Here, **彼此** functions as an object.

我们彼此的爱好相同。

Our hobbies are similar to each other.

In this sentence, **彼此** serves as an attributive modifier. Another distinctive feature of **彼此**, unlike the adverb **互相**, is its ability to undergo reduplication. When reduplicated, it conveys the meaning of near equality between two sides:

咱们俩彼此彼此，我画得比你好不了多少。

The two of us are about the same; my drawing is not much better than yours. [5; 68]

The Synonyms **互相** and **相互**:

The word **互相** belongs to the adverb category, whereas **相互** is classified as an adjective. Both denote a reciprocal relationship or a similar degree or state between two or more people or entities. However, since **互相** is an adverb, it can only function as an adverbial modifier, while **相互**, as an adjective, can function as both an attributive modifier and an adverbial. Moreover, **相互** tends to be more characteristic of formal or literary style.

1. 姐弟俩都在镇上上中学，应该互相照顾。

The sister and brother both attend middle school in town and should take care of each other.

2. 夫妻间应该相互（/互相）体谅。

Husband and wife should understand each other.

In the above examples, **互相** reflects a colloquial style, while **相互** represents a more literary tone. In the following sentence, **相互** functions as an attributive modifier:

企业和顾客的相互关系，应该是彼此信赖。

The relationship between enterprises and customers should be based on mutual trust.

When **相互** functions as an attributive, it combines with a limited number of words. In addition, **相互** can co-occur with the words **间** and **之间**, functioning as either an attributive or an adverbial:

要处理好两个单位相互间的关系。

The mutual relationship between the two institutions should be properly managed.

两个厂的产品相互之间竞争很激烈。

The competition between the products of the two factories is very intense.

The adverb **互相** cannot directly function as an attributive. For example, expressions such as **互相关系** or **互相信赖的感觉** are unacceptable. Instead, relationships or feelings can only be linked to **互相** through intermediary words, as in **互相合作的关系** or **互相信赖的感觉**. In such cases, **互相** functions as an adverbial modifier.

Furthermore, **互相** typically collocates with disyllabic or polysyllabic words and rarely forms combinations with monosyllabic words, except in set phrases. It is widely used in four-character idiomatic expressions such as **互敬互让** (“mutual respect and concession”) and **互有伤亡** (“mutual casualties”). [1; 231–232]

Yang Jizhou and Jia Yongfen highlight another important distinction: the possessive particle **的** can follow **相互**, but it cannot follow **互相**:

我们两国人民之间的援助是相互的，我们援护了你们，同样你们也援护了我们

。

The assistance between the peoples of our two countries is mutual: we supported you, and likewise, you supported us.

The following table illustrates words that commonly collocate—or cannot collocate—with **互相** and **相互**:

	~帮助	~支持	~影响	~关心	~促进	~作用	~利用	~关系	~结合
互相	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓
相互	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

From the analysis of the table, it can be observed that:

- 互相 / 相互帮助 – to help each other
- 互相 / 相互支持 – to support each other
- 互相 / 相互影响 – to influence each other
- 互相 / 相互关心 – to care for each other
- 互相 / 相互促进 – to promote each other
- 互相 / 相互利用 – to make mutual use of
- 互相 / 相互结合 – to combine mutually [2]

The adverb **互相** cannot directly collocate with **作用** (interaction) or **关系** (relationship), whereas **相互作用** (“interaction”) and **相互关系** (“mutual relationship”) are acceptable combinations.

Conclusion. In conclusion, this study examined the stylistic, grammatical, syntactic, and semantic distinctions among the Chinese words **彼此**, **互相**, and **相互**, which convey the meanings of “each other” and “mutual.” The analysis revealed that **彼此**, as a pronoun, can function as an object or an attributive modifier, can undergo reduplication, and directly connects to the predicate after the subject. The

word 互相, classified as an adverb, is indirectly connected to the predicate and typically collocates with disyllabic or polysyllabic words. The adjective 相互 can function as both an attributive and an adverbial and can co-occur with the particle 的.

Correct differentiation and usage of these synonyms ensure precision, logical coherence, and stylistic appropriateness in Chinese discourse. The findings of this study are of practical value for learners of Chinese, as they contribute to the development of skills for using synonymous words appropriately in context. Future research may apply the same analytical framework to other pronoun, adverb, and adjective synonyms in Chinese, thereby further enhancing the effectiveness of language learning.

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