

The Role of Lǎo 老 in the Noun Evolution in Middle Chinese Grammar

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Abstract

The paper is to examine Chinese noun evolution by means of Lǎo 老 in Middle Chinese Grammar. In this context, *Lǎo* 老 is introduced firstly which constitutes notional words instead of prefixes. Then, related examples are given and analyzed in accordance with their constituent role. It is found that *lǎo* 老 became a prefix after the Six Dynasties, which is articulated with five concrete contexts of its usage. The roles of *lǎo* 老 act as evolutionary features of noun in Middle Chinese grammar.

Keywords: Noun evolution, Middle Chinese Grammar, Notional words, Constituent role

1. Introduction

Lǎo 老 is literally an adjective in Chinese. In the following Chinese sentences, *lǎo* 老 constitutes notional words instead of prefixes, as exemplified in the following Middle Chinese sentences.

(1) Lǎofū guànguàn, xiǎozǐ jiǎojiǎo. 老夫灌灌, 小子躄躄. (The old man is full of sincerity, while the young boy is so arrogant.) [From *Bǎn* 板 (Being Harsh) of *Dà Yǎ* 大

雅 (Major Odes) in *Shī* 詩 (Book of Songs)]

(2) [Fán Chí] qǐngxué wéi pǔ. [Kǒngzǐ] yuē: “Wú bùrú lǎopǔ.” [樊遲]請學為圃。[孔子]曰: “吾不如老圃。” (Fan Chi was requested to learn vegetable farming with Confucious. Confucious refused and said, “I’m not as good as an old vegetable farmer.”) [From *Zǐ Lù* 子路 (*Zi Lu*) of *Lúnyǔ* 論語 (The Analects of Confucius)]

(3) [Qíhuángōng] jiàn yī lǎogōng ér wènzhī yuē: “Shìwéi hégǔ?” [齊桓公]見一老公而問之曰: “是為何谷?” (Emperor Huan of the Qi Dynasty saw an old man and asked, “What’s this valley?”) [From *Zhèng Lǐ* 政理 (Political Affairs) in *Shuō Yuàn* 說苑 (Graden of Anecdotes) by Li ú Xi àng 劉向 (Liu Xiang) of the Han Dynasty]

(4) Mèngcháng Jūn wènyuē: “Fénggōng yǒuqīn hū?” Duiyuē: “Yǒu lǎomǔ.” 孟嘗君問曰: “馮公有親乎?” 對曰: “有老母。” (Duke Mengchang asked, “Does Duke Feng have any relatives?” It was replied that, “He has an old mother.”) [From *Q í è S ì* 齊策四 (Intrigues of the Qi Dynasty IV) in *Zhànguó C è* 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States)]

(5) Tián Pián zhīshǔ jiē yǐsǐ, Qíxiāngwáng shí ér xúnqīng zuìwéi lǎoshī. 田駢之屬皆已死, 齊襄王時而荀卿最為老師。 (Scholars like Tian Pian all died. During the reign of Emperor Xiang of the Qi Dynasty, Xun Qing was the most prestigious one.) [From *Mèngzǐ Xún Qīng Lièzhuàn* 孟子荀卿列傳 (Biographies of Mencius and Xun Qing) in *Shǐ Jì* 史記 (Records of the Historian)]

In the above-mentioned example (1), *lǎofū* 老夫 is used by old men to address themselves. In the above-mentioned example (2), *lǎopǔ* 老圃 refers to old vegetable farmers. In the above-mentioned example (3), *lǎogōng* 老公 refers to old men. In the above-mentioned example (4), *lǎomǔ* 老母 stands for old mothers. In the example (5) mentioned above, *lǎoshī* 老師 refers to prestigious senior academic scholars. All of them are noun phrases with *lǎo* 老 as their modifiers. There used to be the term of *lǎoshǔ* 老鼠 (rat) in the Han Dynasty. In volume VIII of *Fāngyán* 方言 (Dialects), it reads that, “Biānfú, zìguān érdōng wèizhī fúyì, huò wèizhī fēishǔ, huò wèizhī lǎoshǔ, huò wèizhī xiānshǔ. 蝙蝠, 自關而東謂之服翼, 或謂之飛鼠, 或謂之老鼠, 或謂之僊鼠。” (In the east of the Hanguguan Pass, bats are called Fuyi, animal on wings, or Feishu, flying rat or Laoshu, old-aged rat, or Xianshu, immortal rat.) Mr. Wang Li held that here *lǎo* 老 was not a prefix. According to *C yú án* 辭源 (Sources of Words), “Àn *Sh ìn ùg*, lǎo’ér bùsǐ yuēxiān, fúyì jí biānfú, gǔ yúnshǔ suǒhuà, gùyǒu lǎoshǔ xiānshǔ zhīmíng. 按《釋名》, 老而不死曰僊, 伏翼即蝙蝠, 古云鼠所化, 故有老鼠僊鼠之名。” (Based on *Explaining Terms*, the old but immortal one is referred to as a celestial being. Fuyi, animal on wings, is a term for bats which were transformed into from ancient Yunshu, ancient cloud rat. Hence, bats are also named as old-aged rats or immortal rats.) Consequently, *lǎo* 老 possesses specific meaning in this context. It is after the Six Dynasties that *lǎo* 老 became a prefix. The following are five concrete contexts of its usage.

2. Being Placed in Front of Animal Names and Names of Things

See the following examples.

(1) Jí Fèi zhǎngfáng zhī shì mèi, nǎi hē zhī, jí jiě yīguān kòutóu, qǐ zì gǎi biàn wéi lǎo biē, dà rú chē lún. 及費長房知是魅，乃呵之，即解衣冠叩頭，乞自改變為老鼈，大如車輪。(When Mr. Fei's eldest son came, he recognized it was a monster and began to rebate it. It immediately removed its clothes, and begged for an opportunity to correct its errors. It was then turned into an old turtle as big as the wheel of a carriage.) [From *Li yì zhūàn* 列異傳 (*Stories of Demons*) by Zhāng Huá 張華 (Zhang Hua) in the Jin Dynasty]

(2) Xiānshǒu quèpán lǎoyā sè, cuīhuá bǎochāi zān bú dé. 纖手卻盤老鴉色，翠滑寶釵簪不得。(Her delicate fingers were coiling up her hair, which was as black as an old crow. The hairpin with jewelries was too smooth to wear.) [From *Měirén Shūtóu Gē* 美人梳頭歌 (The Poem on a Beauty Combing Her Hair) by Lǐ Hè 李賀 (Li He) of the Tang Dynasty]

(3) Jūn bú jiàn xī rì Shǔ tiān zǐ, huà zuò dù juān sì lǎo wū. 君不見昔日蜀天子，化作杜鵑似老烏。(Haven't you seen that the diseased Emperor of the Shu State turned into a crow-like cuckoo?) [From the poem of *Dù juān xíng* 杜鵑行 (The Travel of Cuckoo) by Dù Fǔ 杜甫 (Du Fu) of the Tang Dynasty]

(4) Lǎo hǔ xué zhōng wò, liè fū bù gǎn kuī. 老虎穴中卧，獵夫不敢窺。(When the tiger is in the cave, no hunter dares to peep the cave inside.) [From *Hú yīn qǔ* 湖陰曲 (The South of Lake) by Sū Zhé 蘇轍 (Su Zhe) of the Song Dynasty]

In the above-mentioned example (1), *lǎo biē* 老鼈 is equal to *biē* 鼈 (a turtle). While *lǎo yā* 老鴉 in the above-mentioned example (2) and *lǎo wū* 老烏 in the above-mentioned example (3) both refer to a crow. In the example (4) mentioned above, *lǎo hǔ* 老虎 is *hǔ* 虎 (a tiger).

In addition, it can be placed in front of names of things. Examples are as follows.

(1) Lè yǔ hān xuè, yǐn [lǐ] yáng bì xiào yuē: “Gū wǎng rì yàn qīng lǎo quán, qīng yì bǎo gū dú shǒu.” 勒與酣謔，引[李]陽臂笑曰：“孤往日厭卿老拳，卿亦飽孤毒手。” (Shi Le drank with Liyang, holding his arm and joked, “I used to hate your fists, and you also suffer a lot from my tough hands.” [From *Shí Lè Zǎijì Xià* 石勒載記下 (The Biography of Shi Le II)]

(2) Jì sǒu huáng quán lǐ, hái yīng niàng lǎo chūn. 紀叟黃泉裏，還應釀老春。(The Old Ji is nowadays the netherworld; However, he is still able to make the alcohol of Laochun, Spring.) [From the poem of *Kū Xuānchéng Shànniàng Jì sǒu* 哭宣城善釀紀叟 (In Mourning for Old Ji, Brew Master in Xuan City) by Lǐ Bái 李白 (Li Bai) of the Tang Dynasty]

In the above-mentioned example (1), *lǎo quán* 老拳 refers to a fist. In the above-mentioned example (2), *lǎo chūn* 老春 is the name of an alcohol.

3. Being Placed in Front of Kinship Terms and Adjectives

See the following examples.

(1) Jìng xuān jù huò jí, yǐ gào Gāo zǔ. Gāo zǔ xiào yuē: “Dàn lìng lǎo xiōng píng’ān,

bìwú guòlù.”敬宣懼禍及，以告高祖。高祖笑曰：“但令老兄平安，必無過慮。” (Jingxuan was afraid there might be any trouble, so he told Emperor Gaozu about it. Emperor Gaozu laughed, “All that you need to do is to ensure my old brother’s safety. No need to worry too much about anything else.”) [From *Liú Jìngxuān Zhuàn* 劉敬宣傳 (The Biography of Liu Jingxuan) in *Sòng Shū* 宋書 (The Book of the Song Dynasty)]

(2) Dàzhàngfū qǐdāng yǐ lǎozǐ qiú míng? 大丈夫豈當以老姊求名? (How can a real man rely on his old sister for fame?) [From *Guō Yì Zhuàn* 郭奕傳 (The Biography of Guo Yi) in *Jìn Shū* 晉書 (The Book of the Jin Dynasty)]

(3) Shíyùn lái shí, mǎi zhuāngtián, qǔ lǎopó. 時運來時，買莊田，取老婆。 (When fortune comes, you can buy farmlands and take a wife.) [From *Yèshì* 夜市 (Night Fair) in volume XIII of *Mèngliáng Lù* 夢梁錄 (Introduction of Lin’an City) by Wú Zìmù 吳自牧 (Wu Zimu) of the Song Dynasty]

Lǎopó 老婆 (wife) literally referred to old women. For instance, in the 36th poem from *Shī Sānbǎisān Shǒu* 詩三百三首 (303 Poems) by Hán Shān 寒山 (Han Shan), it reads that, “Dōngjiā yī lǎopó, fù lái sānwǔ nián. 東家一老婆，富來三五年。” (There is an old woman living in the east to my house. She has become rich since three or five years ago.) It is after the Song Dynasty that a wife was referred to as *lǎopó* 老婆 (wife).

Furthermore, it can be placed in front of adjectives as appellations representing people’s characteristics, which can be seen in the following examples.

(1) Xiǎowǔ xiáowǔ qúnchén, suíqí zhuàngmào, gèyǒu bǐlèi ...Liú Xiùzhī jiǎnlìn, hūwéi lǎoqiān. 孝武狎侮群臣，隨其狀貌，各有比類...劉秀之儉吝，呼為老慳。 (Emperor Xiaowu disrespected his ministers and insulted them by naming them according to their appearance or characters...Liu Xiuzhi was stingy and thus was called Mr. Stingy.) [From *Wáng Xuánmó Zhuàn* 王玄謨傳 (The Biography of Wang Xuanmo) in *Sòng Shū* 宋書 (The Book of the Song Dynasty)]

(2) Tiánbā wù lǎocāng, liánrǔ jīn zhǎozī. 田巴兀老蒼，憐汝矜爪鬚。 (The old man Tianbawu pities your precious sharp claws) [From the poem of *Cháo Lǔliánzǐ* 嘲魯連子 (Laughing at Lulianzi Eagle) by Hán Yù 韓愈 (Han Yu)]

(3) Qí tiānnǚ détuō dào jiā, bèi liǎnggè āzǐ jiēmà lǎolín. 其天女得脫到家，被兩個阿姊皆罵老搨。 (The fairy maiden managed to return home, and was cursed by two of her elder sisters as being foolish.) [From volume I of *Sōushén Jì* 搜神記 (Stories of Immortals) in *Dūnhuáng Biànwén Jí* 敦煌變文集 (Collections of Narrative Literature in Dunhuang)]

In the above-mentioned example (1), *lǎoqiān* 老慳 refers to a dingy person, while *lǎocāng* 老蒼 in the example (2) mentioned above is a goshawk. In the above-mentioned example (3), *lǎolín* 老搨 means a foolish person.

4. Being Placed in Front of Surnames or First Names

Examples are as follows.

(1) Cǐshì Lǎoshí jǐzhù, liáoyǐ fèngzèng. 此是老石機杼，聊以奉贈。 (This is weaved by us, Mr. Shi's family. I would like to present it to you as a gift.) [From *Shí Yào* 石曜 (Shi Yao) of *Rú lín Zhuàn* 儒林傳 (The Biography of Scholars) in *Běiqí Shū* 北齊書 (Book of Northern Qi Dynasty)]

(2) Měi bèi Lǎoyuán tōu gé lǜ, kǔjiāo Duǎnlǐ fú gē xíng. 每被老元偷格律，苦教短李伏歌行。 (Old Yuan always imitates my poetic meters secretly, and Short Li deeply admires my poetic style.) [From the poem of *Biānjí Zhuōshī Chéng Yīshíwǔ Juàn Yīntí Juànmò Xìzèng Yuán Jiǔ, Lǐ Èrshí* 編集拙詩成一十五卷因題卷末戲贈元九，李二十 (A Poem Jokingly Dedicated to Yuan Jiu and Li Ershi at the End of the Book as the Summary of My 15-volume Poem Collection) by Bái Jūyì 白居易 (Bai Juyi) of the Tang Dynasty]

(3) Xié xíng tí fēnbì, duǎnjuàn xiě hóngjiān. Ròuwèi jīngshí wàng, tóufēng dāng rì wàng. Lǎozhāng zhī dìngfú, Duǎnlǐ ài yīngdiān. 斜行題粉壁，短卷寫紅箋。肉味經時忘，頭風當日痊。老張知定伏，短李愛應顛。 (Inscribed poems were on the pink wall along the sloping road. Short poems were written on red paper. The smell of meat was soon forgotten and the headache was soon recovered. Lao Zhang must have hidden his knowledge, and Short Li should have had crazy enthusiasm.) [From the poem of *Jiānglóu Yèyín Yuán Jiǔ Lǜshī Chéng Sānshí Yùn* 江樓夜吟元九律詩成三十韻 (The 30th Poem Composed After Reading Yuan Jiu's Metrical Poetry)]

(4) Lǎokě néngwéi zhú xiězhēn, Xiǎopō jīnyǔ shí chuánshén. 老可能為竹寫真，小坡今與石傳神。 (Lao Ke is able to draw bamboos as authentic as possible, and Xiao Po's stone portraiture is vivid and quite lifelike.) [From the poem of *Tí Guò Suǒhuà Kūmù Zhúshí* 題過所畫枯木竹石 (A Theme Poem for the Dead Trees, Bamboos and Stones I Used to Paint) by Sū Shì 蘇軾 (Su Shi) of the Song Dynasty]

5. Conclusions

In the above-mentioned example (1), *Lǎoshí* 老石 is *Shí Yào* 石曜 (Shi Yao). In the above-mentioned example (2), *Lǎoyuán* 老元 refers to *Yuán Zhēn* 元稹 (Yuan Zhen). In the above-mentioned example (3), *Lǎozhāng* 老張 is *Zhāng Jí* 張籍 (Zhang Ji). In sum, *Lǎo* 老 is put in front of the surname in the three examples. While in the example (4) mentioned above, *Lǎokě* 老可 refers to *Wén Yǔkě* 文與可 (Wen Yuke). Here *lǎo* 老 is put in front of the first name in the context.

The paper examines the roles of Chinese character of *Lǎo* 老 in the noun evolution in Middle Chinese Grammar. It is with evolutionary features of noun in Middle Chinese grammar, functioning as notional words rather than prefixes. Its roles are exemplified in accordance with their constituent role. Meanwhile, the character of *lǎo* 老 as a prefix after the Six Dynasties is articulated with five concrete contexts of its usage.

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