

## The ways of the truth: The Chinese etymon ‘truth’ in four Asian languages

**Keywords:** *discourse marker, truth-etymon, semasiological cycle, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Korean*

China has played a significant role in Asia for millenia to the point of designating China and its neighboring region as the ‘Sinosphere’. The influence is prominently visible in languages of Korea, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, Thailand. This paper analyzes the Chinese etymon *zhen* (真, 眞) ‘truth’ in four Asian languages, i.e., *zhenshi* and *zhende* in Chinese, *shinni* in Japanese, *jing* in Thai, and *cincca* in Korean, which grammaticalized into the discourse markers (DMs) to varying degrees. Since these cognates share the identical origin, a comparative study sheds light on the force of source semantics on the ‘evolutive’ or ‘internally-motivated’ development of DMs (Heine and Kuteva 2005), especially because, despite the lexical borrowing of the etymon, spoken communication among the four languages was minimal in historical times. For Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, oral contact was nearly non-existent among them, and oral contact between Chinese and Thai is thought to have been substantial in contact areas, but Chinese influence on Modern Thai is not highly visible due to Thailand’s enthusiastically embracing India for religious reasons (cf. ‘Indosphere’).

A comparative study of the cognates in the four languages shows that their lexical usage strongly reflects the source meaning ‘truth’, but the discourse functions of the DMs derived from the etymon show variation. For instance, Japanese *shinni* carries the function of intensification, but its discourse-pragmatic functions otherwise are not noticeable (Higashiizumi and Shibasaki, *forthc.*). This intensifying function is shared by all DMs in Chinese, Thai, and Korean. These three languages also have the common function of signaling surprise, and certain types of negative attitudes such as disgust, discontent, and disalignment (Chinese), disbelief and disalignment (Thai), and frustration (Korean). Thai and Korean have an additional function of marking sudden remembrance, i.e., an interjection-like usage before presenting a new topic that has been forgotten. Thai has a function derived from intensification and negative attitude, i.e., disregard for emphasis. Korean has a unique function of pause-filling, which suggests that the original ‘truth’ meaning has now been nearly completely bleached, a state of affairs reminiscent of degradation of semantic force to the point of ‘involuntary indication of insecurity’ (Butler 2008) or ‘empty’ intensifiers (Lakoff 1975).

This study confirms the usefulness of the notion of ‘semasiological’ cyclicality (Hansen 2018) across languages and shows that the developmental paths may be similar even though the extent of development may vary by individual languages. (395)

## References

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