The Semantic Continuum from Disposition to Causative Meaning: Diachronic Changes of Chinese Disposition Construction

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The gradualness of changes has been a concern of grammatical constructionalization. It is assumed that language advances in rather slight and tiny steps that language users usually note no difference (e.g., De Smet 2012, Fischer 2018). The underlying motivation is attributed to analogy, especially its influence on the morphosyntactic changes. This study further argues that semantic features also expand in a gradual way.The supporting evidence comes from the Chinese disposition construction "NP_1+ bǎ+NP_2+VP", in which *bǎ /*把 is a preposition marking theme/patient, and the object, NP_2, precedes the predicate VP. The construction as a whole denotes the meaning of disposition or domination. For example,

他把桌子擦干净了。

tā bǎ zhuō zǐ cā gān jìng le.
3.SG DISP table wipe clean.
'He wiped the table clean.'

Existing studies have indicated that the constructionalization of "NP_1+ bǎ+NP_2+VP" took place in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and constructional changes followed afterward. To illustrate its changes, we aim to address three questions: in each dynasty from the Tang (618-907) to the Qing (1644-1911), (1) how might different slots in the construction change both semantically and syntactically? (2) how did slots interact with each other? and (3) how did changes in the slots influence the semantic changes of the whole construction?

Our data are retrieved from the Peking University CCL Corpus of ancient Chinese, an online corpus of more than 200 million characters. This corpus includes text samples distributed across such genres as poems to novels from the Zhou (1100-771BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), thus making an ideal corpus for diachronic study. We randomly sampled 200 instances per dynasty after excluding invalid cases. All extracted constructions are annotated for seven linguistic factors (c.f., Levin 1993, Givón 2001, Beavers 2011, Levshina 2022), namely the semantic type of the causer (animate, abstract, natural force, events, and inanimate) and causee (animate, abstract things, natural force, and inanimate), the semantic role of the NP_2 (agent, sentient, causer, theme), the semantics of VP (psychological change, appearing, disposing of, moving, etc.), the volition of the causer (volitional, non-volitional), the affectedness of the NP_2 (quantized change, non-quantized change, potential for change, unspecified change), and the degree of causation (direct causation, indirect causation). The annotated data are analysed by multidimensional scaling, random forest analysis, and inference trees.

It is predicted that the construction forms a continuum from more of a disposition meaning to a more causative meaning, during which process the semantics of the VP_2 plays a major role. More specifically, the manipulation of NP_1 to NP_2 is decreasing while the controlling of NP_2 to the event described by the VP_2 increases. To some extent, the series of changes are discrete micro-changes, and such micro-steps provide preconditions for the later macro-changes. This study further illustrates the gradualness (Traugott and Trousdale 2013) and diffusion (De Smet 2016) in the process of language change.

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