

Attraction and Differentiation: Diachronic Developments of the Chinese Disposition Alternation

Shan Zuo, Fuyin (Thomas) Li
Beihang University
zshanzuo@126.com; thomasli@buaa.edu.cn

Keywords: Chinese disposition alternation, attraction, differentiation, analogy, usage-based approach

Constructions are thought to be stored in an associative network where constructions sharing formal and functional properties are connected to each other. Constructions fulfilling a similar function can compete or cooperate (e.g., Zehentner 2019), during which process, they can be attracted to or differentiated from each other (e.g., De Smet et al 2018). And the underlying mechanism is proposed to result from analogy (or analogization). This study, by adopting a usage-based approach to language change, seeks to explore the diachronic changes of Chinese disposition alternation.

Chinese “NP1+BA+NP2+VP” constructions, termed disposition constructions, are characterized by the object being put in front of the predicate with an auxiliary verb, namely BA, to express a kind of disposition meaning. BA can be exemplified by “bǎ/hold” and “jiāng/lead”, the two most frequently used ones today, apart from “qǔ/take”, “zhuō/seize”, and “chí/grasp” that performed this function in Medieval Chinese. The disposition constructions, as a unique construction to Chinese, have received considerable attention (e.g., Thompson 1973, Peyraube and Wiebusch 2020, Fang and Liu 2021). However, relatively little, if any, research has paid attention to the disposition alternations. This study aims to quantitatively address the diachronic development of Chinese disposition constructions, focusing on the two exemplifications, namely “NP1+ bǎ+NP2+VP” and “NP1+ jiāng+ NP2+VP”. The examples are below:

大人[把]左右暂退出去。(清《彭公案》)

dà rén [bǎ] zuǒ yòu zàn tuì chū qù.

grown-up DISP left right temporarily retreat out go.

His excellency, order his attendants to clear out. (The Qing Dynasty, *Cases of Peng Gong*)

智化要[将]柳青带入水寨。(清，《七侠五义》)

zhì huà yào [jiāng] liǔ qīng dài rù shuǐ zhài.

Zhìhua Will DISP Liuqing take into water village.

‘Zhìhua will take Liuqing to the water village. (The Qing Dynasty, *Seven Knights and Five Chivalrous Men*)’

The questions are how these two functionally similar expressions are likely to undergo over time, and whether they are becoming more similar or more differentiated (e.g., De Smet et al 2018, Traugott 2020). The data are retrieved from the Peking University CCL Corpus of ancient Chinese, an online corpus of more than 200 million characters. By examining the syntactic and semantic features of each slot in the constructions and adopting the method of chi-square test and multidimensional scaling technique, the study found that “bǎ” and “jiāng” constructions show an increasing tendency of overlapping conceptual space; not only do “bǎ” and “jiāng” compete, but they have similar patterns of development by modeling after the ways the other have taken; the division of labor between the two constructions is formed in a rather gradual way. The results further contribute to the theories of language changes, especially actualization, attraction and differentiation by assuming that differentiation can also happen at concrete levels.

References

- De Smet, Hendrik, Frauke D’hoedt, Lauren Fonteyn, & Kristel Van Goethem. 2018. The changing functions of competing forms: Attraction and differentiation. *Cognitive Linguistics* 29(2). 197–234.
- Fang, Yu & Haitao Liu. 2021. Predicting syntactic choice in Mandarin Chinese: a corpus-based analysis of *ba* sentences and SVO sentences. *Cognitive Linguistics* 32(2). 219–250.
- Peyraube, Alain & Thekla Wiebusch. 2020. New insights on the historical evolution of differential object marking (DOM) in Chinese. In Xing, Janet Zhiqun. (Ed.), *A typological approach to grammaticalization and lexicalization: East meets West*, 101–129. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
- Thompson, Sandra A. 1973. Transitivity and some problems with the BA construction in Mandarin Chinese. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 1(2). 208–221.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. 2020. The intertwining of differentiation and attraction as exemplified by the history of recipient transfer and benefactive alternations. *Cognitive Linguistics* 31(4). 549–578.

Zehentner, Eva. 2019. *Competition in language change: The rise of the English dative alternation*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.