

A semantic change and reanalysis from delimitative to progressive in Sinitic languages

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore a semantic change involving the progressive aspect in complex sentences which has developed on the basis of a reduplicated form for the delimitative aspect. This study is based on a sample of 641 Chinese languages from the ten main branches of Sinitic. The delimitative aspect is defined by Li & Thompson (1989: 232) as “doing an action a little bit, or for a short period”. It can be coded by two main structures in Chinese languages that have the following distribution: (i) verb reduplication [VERB-(ONE)-VERB] in the dialects of eastern China (Beijing Mandarin and Wu Chinese) as in (1), or (ii) by a verb-complement structure [VERB-(ONE)-XIA 下 ‘while’] in western and central China (Lan-Yin and Southwestern Mandarin) as in (2). Furthermore, in subordinate clauses, the reduplicated forms of the delimitative constructions, such as [[VERB-VERB]_{DELM} – [VERB-VERB]_{DELM}] in Wu in (3) and [[VERB-XIA 下 ‘while’]_{DELM} – [VERB-XIA 下 ‘while’]_{DELM}] in Yue as in (4), are able to indicate the progressive aspect (for dynamic verbs) or a non-progressive imperfective aspect (for stative verbs) and so provide background information. This is found in most non-Mandarin branches of southern China but is rarely used in the Northern Mandarin dialects. Arguments are presented to demonstrate that there is an intermediary stage of the continuative which can be plausibly considered the first extension of meaning from the delimitative. From the continuative stage, it further develops into the progressive aspect in many non-Mandarin branches of the Sinitic languages.

Keywords: delimitative aspect, progressive aspect, Sinitic languages, reduplication

[VERB-(ONE)-VERB]:

- (1) Beijing dialect 北京方言 (Beijing Mandarin, Sinitic)
商量商量
shāngliang-shāngliang
[discuss-discuss]_{DELM}
‘Have a discussion.’ (Zhou Yimin, 1998: 75)

[VERB-(ONE)-XIA 下 ‘while’]:

- (2) Jimsar dialect 吉木薩尔方言 (Lan-Yin Mandarin, Sinitic)
尝一下
tɕ^haŋ⁴⁴ i xa
[taste one while]_{DELM}
‘Taste a little.’ (Zhou and Wang, 1991: 135)

[[VERB-VERB]_{DELM} – [VERB-VERB]_{DELM}]:

- (3) Jiaying dialect 嘉兴方言 (Wu, Sinitic)
讲讲讲讲, 笑起来哩
kã⁴⁴-kã⁴⁴-kã⁴⁴-kã,
[[talk-talk]_{DELM} - [talk-talk]_{DELM}]PROG
‘(She) was talking for a long time and then began to laugh.’ (Xu Yue, 2016: 118)

[[VERB-XIA 下 ‘while’]_{DELM} – [VERB-XIA 下 ‘while’]_{DELM}]:

- (4) Guangzhou dialect 广州方言 (Yue, Sinitic)
倾下倾下, 倾到天光
k^hɛŋ⁵³-ha¹³-k^hɛŋ⁵³-ha¹³,
[[talk-while]_{DELM} - [talk-while]_{DELM}] PROG
‘(We) were talking until the dawn.’ (Chen and Ma, 2000: 247)

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