Grammatical Words and Discourse Markers in Chinese: A Corpus-based Investigation of Grammaticalization

Yung-O Biq
San Francisco State University

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between discourse and grammar has been enthusiastically discussed in recent years. Many linguists have become convinced that the only way to understand linguistic structure is to consider it as an adaptive response to recurrent habits in the way people talk to each other (e.g. Du Bois 1987; Givon 1979; Hopper 1987; Hopper & Thompston 1993; Hopper & Traugott 1993). This approach has also been taken up in a number of corpus-based studies of Chinese in the 1990's (e.g. Biq 1994, 1995; Liu 1993; Huang 1995).

In this paper, we would like to take up the corpus-based approach again to investigate the interaction between discourse and grammar, and offer support from Chinese to the hypothesis that grammaticalization is a result of the daily, routinized use of language. We will examine and compare how three related Chinese expressions, jiushi, jiushishuo, and jiushuo are used in both speech and writing.

What we would report in this paper is the variety of uses of the three abovementioned expressions in daily conversation as these uses are compared with those seen in press reportage, the relatively "conservative" written language text type. We argue that the three expressions are currently undergoing a grammaticalization process whereby the original copula meaning of jiushi is first reduced to a connective function marking textual coherence. This semantic "reduction" is developed through the metonymic association that jiushi has with the verb of saying. This connective use is then further reduced to a use in which jiushi serves as a floor holder.
in interactive speech. The behavior of the three Chinese expressions under study not only evidences that repeated daily language use is where early stages of grammaticalization take place, but also supports the hypothesis that linguistic contiguity is one of the important sources leading to the inception of grammaticalization.

2. DATABASE

Before we proceed to discuss the three expressions, we need to talk about the database we use for this study. There are two types of corpora. The first one is casual speech from a mostly dyadic Mandarin conversation about 80 minutes long. (Please refer to Appendix 1. for transcription notations.) The second one is written Chinese in press reportage from the People's Daily published in Mainland China, dating between January 1993 to December 1993. Daily conversation is worth investigating because it is the most common context in which a language is situated. On the other hand, (written) press reportage is a good contrast to daily conversation: the two genres occupy almost the two ends of a continuum of text types in terms of their gradation of "editedness" and "plannedness" (Biber 1988). For ease of reference, we shall call, in the remainder of this paper, the conversational data CS (for conversational speech) and the People's Daily data PR (for press reportage).

We will also use abbreviated forms for two of the three expressions in the remainder of this paper. From here on, jiushi will be JS, and jiushishuo will be JSS. However, jiushuo remains spelled out in full form.

3. THE THREE EXPRESSIONS IN PR

In this section, we discuss the meanings of the three expressions and the ways they are used (if at all) in PR. Since, as said above, PR is considered the most "conservative" (written) text type, meanings and uses
appear in PR are considered the "canonical" ones. These canonical meanings and uses will be our basis when we proceed to discuss how the three expressions are used in CS in Section 4.

3.1. Jiushi

The expression JS consists of the adverb jiu and the copula shi, 'to be'. Jiu is a versatile adverb able to carry out a number of functions in different contexts (Big 1984, 1988; Liu 1993; Wang 1956). Most important, and most relevant to our purpose here, jiu is a "backward-linking" connective positioned before the predicate in the main clause signaling the temporal and/or causal relationship between the situation denoted in the antecedent clause and the situation denoted in the main clause. Consider the following (constructed) examples:

(1) Ta da le dianhua jiu zou le.
    3s call PF telephone JIU walk PRT

    '(lit.) (After) s/he made the phone call (then) s/he left. --> S/He left after s/he made the phone call.'

(2) Ni bu da dianhua lai, wo jiu bu qu jie ni.
    you NEG call telephone come I JIU NEG go pick-up you

    '(lit.) (If) you don't phone me (then) I don't pick you up. --> I won't pick you up unless you phone me. --> I'll pick you up as long/soon as you phone me.'

In other words, what jiu denotes in these contexts is an equivalent of the then in 'once after/as soon as ..., then ...' or in 'if ..., then ...'.

The expression JS, literally '... then be/is ...', is mostly used as a copula with an emphasis on the preciseness of the equation. It is equivalent to the 'is precisely' in the English 'A is precisely B'. Consider the following example from PR:
(3) Shanghai jinnian yao ban de shier jian shi shi, Shanghai this=year want do DE twelve M concrete thing
diyi jian jiushi youguan chengshi jiaotong first M JIUSHI concern city transportation
sheshi de. facility DE
'The first of the twelve important things to be accomplished this year in Shanghai is (precisely) about the city transportation facilities.'

However, through the same pragmatic inferences that polysemize the meanings of English scalar words such as just (Traugott 1986), the Chinese JS can also denote an equational with either an uptoner (i.e., 'is as much as') or with a downtoner (i.e. 'is as little as -- is just/only'. Consider the following examples from PR:

(4) Tamen chengbao de gongcheng danwu yitian sunshi they contract DE construction delay one=day loss
jiushi sanqian yuan. JIUSHI three=thousand dollar
"For the construction project they contracted, the business loss for any delay is (as much as) 3,000 dollars per day."

(5) Ta shuo, jiaoyu gaige guigenjiedi 3s say education reform return=root=summary=bottom
jiushi yiju hua, yao shizhong an jiaoyu JIUSHI one=M sentence want always follow education
jiaoxue guilu ban shi. teaching principle do business
'S/He says that the bottom line for educational reform is just/simply to follow the principles