

Grammaticalization of the Wh-word *Sheme* ‘What’ as an Expression of Negative Mood in Mandarin Chinese

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A diachronic research on the wh-word *sheme* ‘what’ in Mandarin Chinese exhibits that it may be derived from the combination of *shi* ‘BE (copula)’ and *wu*, an indefinite nominal meaning ‘things’. As shown in the following example, this construal can be supported by the data in Earlier Southern Min (e.g., Wu 2001), which is one of the Chinese dialects, and the phonological resemblance makes it more convincing.

- (1) Lin2 jit8-kan1 ciah8 si7-mih4?
 You(pl.) day-during eat what
 ‘What did you eat in the daytime?’

In (1), *si7-mih4* has been fused as a wh-word, in which *mih4* refers to *wu* ‘things’ originally (Lien and Yu 2006), and *si7* comes from a copular BE. Furthermore, it has been argued in the literature that the copular *shi* in Mandarin Chinese can function as a focus marker (Teng 1979; Xu 1998), as exemplified in (2) and (3).

- (2) Shiwo mingtian da che qu Taipei. (Modern)
 SHI I tomorrow take vehicle go Taipei
 ‘It is I who will go to Taipei by bus tomorrow.’
- (3) Wei ming shicong. (Archaic)
 Only command SHI follow
 ‘It is only commands that one will obey.’

Since *shi* can be analyzed as a focus marker, the wh-word *sheme* that results from the fusion of *shi* and *wu* can be assumed to have an inherent focus, which is in line with the argument that the interrogative words seeking new information as the answers are always interpreted as the focus in questions, indicating the unshared information by the speaker and the hearer (e.g., Xu 1998; Szendrői 2004; Xu 2004). Such semantic or pragmatic nature of an interrogative word shows the potentiality to convey the speaker-oriented mood in sentences. The ambiguity of the question in (4) illustrates this possibility, and the sole interpretation allowed in (5) and (6) can be taken as an indication of grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott 1993; Hopper 1996).

- (4) Ta neng jiao sheme?
 He can teach what
 a. ‘What can he teach?’
 b. ‘After all, what can he teach?’ (Intended meaning: he can teach nothing.)
- (5) Ni xiao sheme xiao!
 You laugh what laugh
 ‘You have no reason to laugh!’
- (6) Ta qu sheme Taipei!
 He go what Taipei
 ‘He has no reason to go to Taipei!’

To sum up, this paper attempts to tackle semantic and syntactic changes involved in grammaticalization with a case study of *sheme* ‘what’ in Mandarin Chinese, and verifies that

the meaning change from an interrogative word to an expression of speaker-oriented mood is driven by pragmatic factors (Hopper and Traugott 1993). The negative tone can be generated due to the force of the pragmatic principle of informativeness (cf. Han 2002), and become conventionalized in the process of grammaticalization. In addition, the syntactic shift of *scheme* from a nominal to an adverbial, as shown in (6), serves as an apparent manifestation of grammaticalization. The discussion of this paper is also supposed to cover the other wh-words in Mandarin Chinese, such as *nali* 'where', each of which may be grammaticalized to a different degree.

References

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