

From anaphora to topicalization
The grammaticalization of Chinese 3rd person singular pronoun
in Mandarin conversation

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This paper investigates the grammaticalization of the Chinese third person singular pronoun, *ta*, in naturally occurring conversation. Over 4,800 tokens of *ta* in a database of Mandarin conversation segments of 15 hours in total length are examined and categorized. While overwhelmingly (85%) the form is used anaphorically to refer to a singular noun, the remaining *ta* tokens manifest a variety of uses in which stages of further grammaticalization can be identified. Most significantly among them are (1) the generic use, (2) the inferred use, and (3) the topic marker use (cf. Biq 1990; Zhang & Fang 1996; Fang 2004; Dong 2005). In the generic use, *ta* refers to a countable noun in plural form, indicating the decategorization of the grammatical “number”. In the inferred use, *ta* refers to an entity that is not mentioned in prior talk nor present in the speech context but inferable from the content of the talk. Finally, the topic marker use is a step further away from the “referring” notion as traditionally defined. In some cases, *ta* refers not to an entity as defined in semantics but rather to a kind of composite or cumulative antecedent (cf. Saeed 1977/2003). In other cases, there is hardly even a referent available, and *ta* becomes a topic marker marking the continuation of talk on the same topic. Thus, given the communicative needs characteristic of conversational exchanges, the canonically referential *ta* is strategically used as a semantically non-referential but interactionally indexical marker.

The mechanism of the grammaticalization path of *ta* is also explored: the crucial structural factors giving rise to the syntactic reanalysis and the semantic reinterpretation are (a) that the Chinese topic-comment structure allows for the juxtaposition of two nominal elements at the beginning of a clause, and (b) that the subject of a clause is allowed to omit. Finally, a cross-linguistic comparison notes that while in some languages personal pronouns grammaticalize to morphosyntactic (verbal) clitics (Givón 1983; Hopper & Traugott 1993/2003;), in the case of Mandarin, personal pronouns (both the 2nd and the 3rd) grammaticalize to discourse markers (Biq 1991), probably due to the fact that in Chinese another nominal element typically stands between the pronoun and the verbal element – thus blocking the collocation which may lead to morphological fusion – and that in general the most favorable/frequent position for pronouns to occur is the clause/utterance initial position (Du Bois 1987) – thus giving rise to the reinterpretation of the element as functioning at the utterance level .

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