Causal Interpretations of Chinese Temporal Conjunctions: A diachronic and corpus-based study of erhou, ranhou and yushi

Yipu WEI & Jacqueline EVERS-VERMEUL

Utrecht University

Claim & Background:

The theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature implies that people make inferences when they try to communicate with the maximal efforts (Grice, 1981). Conjunctions function as important linguistic cues for making such inferences. As indicated by Levinson's I-enrichment theory (2000) and Sanders' idea of Causality by default (2005), conjunctions that express a temporal sequence would normally imply a causal inference. We will argue that in the Chinese language, which has a rich system expressing temporality, the possibilities of inferring a causal interpretation differ per temporal conjunction.

Analysis:

We analyzed three frequently used Mandarin Chinese temporal conjunctions: erhou, ranhou and yushi. First, we judged 100 Modern Chinese fragments per conjunction to see whether they allowed a temporal interpretation, a causal interpretation, or both. Second, we examined the etymology of these temporal conjunctions to see whether the original meaning of the conjunctions and their components in Ancient Chinese might restrict the possible interpretations. Third, we performed a diachronic corpus-based study on three periods (Ancient Chinese, Middle Ancient Chinese, and Modern Chinese) to investigate the grammaticalization of the three conjunctions. The analytical model included four variables:
1. the presence of a parallel temporal construction in the first of the clauses combined by the temporal conjunction (S1);
2. the presence of other temporal markers in S2;
3. the presence of a verb of communication in S1
4. the clause combination in terms of states and events.
For each period, we also calculated word frequencies on the component characters of each conjunction to track any changes in the semantic transparency of the conjunctions.

Results & Conclusion:

The three conjunctions have different preferences for temporality and causality: yushi indicates a causal interpretation, while erhou favors a temporal one. These preferences can be related to the etymology and differences in the semantic

transparency of the components of these conjunctions. According to our corpus-based analysis on three periods, yushi co-occurs more often with situations that favor a causal interpretation: temporal markers in S2 and verbs of communication in S1. Erhou, on the other hand, co-occurs more frequently with a parallel temporal construction in S1, which triggers a temporal interpretation of erhou. I-enrichment/causality by default is the generalized implicature in pragmatics, but semantic properties specified in the lexicon and other linguistic elements in the context may block or facilitate the causal interpretation.

Selected references:

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Cantonese slang expressions and their mechanisms of semantic change

May L-Y WONG

The University of Hong Kong

This presentation will focus on the notions of metaphorisation, metonymisation and (inter)subjectification as they operate in one domain of Cantonese lexicon, viz, slang expressions. The primary concern has been with the pragmatic properties of these expressions in contemporary spoken Cantonese. I have argued that the source meaning of these expressions has undergone what Traugott (1989, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2010) calls metaphorisation/metonymisation, and this process of semantic change has been accompanied by the development of pragmatic, interpersonal, speaker-based image schemata (inter(subjectification)). What emerges from the current study is a comprehensive picture of lexical items from a literal domain being used with a non-literal meaning that could be attributed to a body-mind mapping. It seems that conceptual metaphor theory has been able to provide a