Semantically conditioned shifts in Chinese*

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This study finds that a type of positional shift within a syntactic category such as a PP (prepositional phrase), may affect linguistic items within a semantic domain. A reanalysis, or metaphorical extension, within one semantic domain does not automatically lend itself to change the word order of a syntactic category as a whole. Rather, a positional shift may proceed in a manner that affects one semantic domain at a time. The positional shifts of the Chinese numeral classifiers and various prepositional phrases probably belong to this type of phenomenon.

Key words : Classifiers – Prepositional Phrases – Passive – Comparative syntactic position – Metaphorical extension.

Un changement de position syntaxique, comme celui qui a affecté les classificateurs ou les groupes prépositionnels en chinois, ne se propage pas à travers toute une catégorie, mais affecte, par réanalyse ou par extension métaphorique, les items qui appartiennent à un même domaine sémantique.


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1. INTRODUCTION

Although Chinese during the last 2,000 years or so has been a highly stable, non-verb-final language (Sun 1996), minor word order shifts have occurred in the last two millennia. This study finds that a type of positional shift within a syntactic category such as a PP (prepositional phrase), may affect linguistic items within a semantic domain. A reanalysis, or metaphorical extension, within one semantic domain does not automatically lend itself to change in the word order of a syntactic category as a whole. Rather, a positional shift may proceed in a manner that affects one semantic domain at a time.

Since Greenberg's (1963) study on word-order universals, word-order typology has become a fundamental part of modern syntactic theories and studies of historical change (Dryer 1992; Givón 1984, 1990; Harris and Campbell 1992; Hawkins 1983; Huang J. 1982; Lehman 1973; Li and Thompson 1974, 1981). Chinese, as a non-verb-final language (Sun and Givon 1985) with many word-order features consistent with the verb-final universals (Li and Thompson 1981), such as adjectives before nouns, relative clauses before nouns, prepositions, etc, is one of the languages that does not follow the word-order universals. In addition, theories have been proposed to account for the exceptions to the language universals. For example, Heaviness Serialization Principle (Harris and Campbell 1995, Hawkins 1983, 1994) says that heavier constituents tend to be placed to the right of their heads to avoid the perceptual difficulty of processing the roles of nominal arguments.

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