

The cognitive semantics of Chinese motion / directional verbs

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This study investigates basic and extended meanings of Chinese motion/directional verbs, which are used frequently in metaphorical extensions. By looking at metaphorical uses in language, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the human conceptual system, which is assumed to be largely metaphorical in nature. One motion/directional verb in Chinese can combine with another to form a compound. Motion/directional verbs/compounds easily enter into a variety of larger constructions and they are frequently used with different senses. Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1988, 1991 & 2008) assumes that a single word is routinely polysemous in its various linguistic expressions. This paper will show that various senses of Chinese motion/directional verbs are actually related. I assume that extensions from the spatial domain to the temporal domain and from the concrete domain to the abstract domain could be found across motion/directional verbs. I will look at motivations behind extension patterns by addressing questions related to pairs of motion/directional verbs. Some verbs used frequently with one paired motion/directional verb are not likely to be compounded with the other due to their semantic (in)compatibility (Yin, 2010). Semantic and functional extensions may be based on a certain component of the total meaning of a lexical item while the other aspects of the meaning are non-salient. I argue that all the extensions are not random but motivated.

1 Semantic extensions

Semantic extensions of a linguistic item from its existing meaning to a new meaning is motivated by a relation or by some commonalities that language users perceive between the old and the new designata (Lichtenberk, 1991). Lakoff (1987) claims that semantic and functional extensions are not completely arbitrary. If an extension takes place, it usually makes sense. Langacker (1987) proposes that not all the facets of the meaning of a linguistic item are equally prominent. Some aspects of the total meaning of the item are more central than others. The relatively central aspects are the ones which are usually thought of as the meaning of the item. However, such facets do not exhaust the total meaning. Implications based on the prominent aspects of the meaning are subsumed in the

total meaning of a given item (Lichtenberk, 1991). Both the prominent aspects of the meaning and the implications based on them may underlie a semantic or functional extension. When different components or substructures are imposed on a base, different senses of a lexical item or construction will be brought about. Thus, semantic or functional extensions may be based on a certain aspect of the total meaning of a linguistic item but the other components of the meaning are not salient in such extensions.

The subjective and open-ended nature of meaning is promoted in the works of functional linguists (e.g. Jackendoff, 1983; Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987 & 1988; Lichtenberk, 1991). Lichtenberk (1991) claims that the meanings of linguistic expressions are not “mere reflections of the properties of phenomena; rather, they reflect our conceptualization of the phenomena, and in that sense they are subjective” (477). This subjective and open-ended nature of meanings enables us to apply linguistic items to new experiences, “to express newly perceived relations among phenomena and thus to form new categories or to alter the make-up of existing categories, and to relate to each other phenomena from different cognitive domains” (Lichtenberk, 1991: 477).

It is human conceptualization (namely metaphor and metonymy) that provides language users cognitive instruments to use concepts from one cognitive domain of experience to conceptualize another cognitive domain of experience (Black, 1979; Reddy, 1979; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Lichtenberk, 1991). For a semantic or functional extension to occur through human conceptualization, there should be some kind of prior perception of a commonality between phenomena from different cognitive domains (Lichtenberk, 1991). The reason for a given conceptual domain to be organized in terms of another domain is not that human beings conceptualize the former in terms of the latter, but that speakers have the metaphorical ability to conceptual similar content in different cognitive domains (Jackendoff, 1983; Langacker, 1987; Shen 1995). Thus, domain selection or shifting (e. g. extending from the spatial domain to the temporal domain on some perceived commonalities) plays an important role in motivating semantic or functional extensions of linguistic items. In the case of Chinese motion/directional verbs, it will be shown that the various semantic and functional extensions are motivated through human conceptualization such as metaphor.

2 Basic and extended meanings of motion/directional verbs

Motion/directional verbs such as *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ can combine with other motion/directional verbs (e.g. *shang* ‘ascend, up’, *xia* ‘descend, down’, *jin* ‘enter, in’, *chu* ‘exit, out’) to form compounds (e.g. *chulai* ‘come out’, *xiaqu* ‘go down’). Motion/directional verbs and their compounds easily enter into various linguistic constructions. They are frequently used with different senses in Chinese. The

traditional analysis of motion/directional verbs often involves mere itemization or just listing of their various senses. Cognitive Grammar assumes that a linguistic item is polysemous in nature in its various linguistic expressions and that various senses of a single word are not unrelated.

The basic meaning of motion/directional verbs such as *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ has a few essential semantic components—the deictic center, movement, source, destination and path (trajectory). Motion/directional verbs like *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ certainly can denote real concrete movement through space as (1) and (2) show.

- (1) Ta lai le Jianada.
 3sg come PERFECITIVE Canada
 ‘S/he came to Canada.’

- (2) Ta qu le xuexiao.
 3sg go PERFECITIVE school
 ‘S/he went to school.’

The motion/directional verbs *lai* ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ in (1) and (2) involve the theme moving toward or away from the speaker's position (vantage position) along a spatial path. Motion/directional verbs in Chinese can not only express real motion but also indicate direction and other various extended meanings. It can be expected that extensions from the spatial domain to the temporal domain and from the concrete domain to the abstract domain could be found across Chinese motion/directional verbs.

Besides being used to express real motion, motion/directional verbs can be used to indicate direction as (3) and (4) illustrate.

- (3) Ta pao lai le.
 3sg run come PERFECITIVE
 ‘S/he ran over here.’

- (4) Ta pao qu le.
 3sg run go PERFECITIVE
 ‘S/he ran over there.’

Lai ‘come’ and *qu* ‘go’ in (3) and (4) do not denote real motion, but indicate direction to or away from the deictic center. Such an extension is motivated by the deictic sense of the core meaning of *lai* ‘come’ or *qu* ‘go’.

In addition to expressing motion and indicating direction, verbs *lai* ‘come’ or *qu* ‘go’ can be used to signify past or future time as in (5) and (6).

- (5) lai nian
 come year
 ‘the coming year’

- (6) qu nian
 go year
 ‘last year’

Semantic extensions of motion/directional verbs from the spatial domain to the temporal domain are exemplified in (5) and (6). Extensions of motion/directional verbs to indicate past or future time is based on the metaphor: PASSAGE OF TIME IS MOVEMENT IN SPACE, which is a subtype of the metaphor TIME IS SPACE, (e.g. Traugott, 1988) and on our conceptualization of time according to which the past moves away from us and the future moves toward us (Lichtenberk, 1991). Fillmore (1997) suggests that time can be thought of as a succession of events and our relation to it can be regarded in one of the two ways: either time moves by us or it is human beings who move along the succession of events. In either case, we think of ourselves as facing the future and it is the conceptualization of time as moving by us that motivates the use of motion/directional verbs to indicate past or future time.

Extensions of motion/directional verbs can be made not only from the spatial domain to the temporal domain but also from a concrete domain to an abstract domain as (7) indicates.

- (7) tiba ta shanglai
 raise him ascend-come
 ‘promote him’

In (7), *shanglai* ‘ascend-come’ does not express spatial movement or indicate direction but is used figuratively, that is, come up high in social (or administrative) position. In this example, the meaning of the motion/directional verb *shanglai* has been extended to an abstract domain.

Motion/directional verbs such as *lai* ‘come’ can also be used as a mental intention verb as in (8). This is another case of semantic extensions from a physical domain to an abstract domain.

- (8) Ta lai mai liwu.
 3sg come buy gift
 ‘S/he’s gonna buy a gift.’

Lai ‘come’ in (8) does not indicate objective motion but signify a kind of mental intention. The domain for the objective motion is physical space while the

one for the verb *lai* ‘come’ used as an intention verb is mental space. The speaker takes the subject’s intended activity as a “destination” and views the process as the subject progressing along a mental path (Shen, 1995).

In Chinese, some of the motion/directional verbs can be used to express aspectual meanings. For example, the compound *qilai* ‘rise-come’ can be used to signal the aspectual meaning of inceptiveness as (9) and (10) shows.

- (9) Ta xiao le *qilai*.
 3sg laugh PERFECTIVE rise-come
 ‘S/he began to laugh.’

- (10) Ta *turan* ku le *qilai*.
 3sg suddenly cry PERFECTIVE rise-come
 ‘S/he began to cry suddenly.’

In (9) and (10), *qilai* does not specify the direction or endpoint of real motion, but instead indicates that a situation has just started and will continue as in *xiao qilai* ‘began to laugh’ and *ku qilai* ‘began to cry’. In these two examples, the motion/directional verb *qilai* indicates the inceptive phase of (usually) affective or emotive events such as *xiao* ‘smile/laugh’ and *ku* ‘cry’. As in *xiao qilai* ‘began to laugh’, *qilai* clearly does not mean ‘rise-come’ to express upward movement. It should, thus, be treated as an idiosyncratic lexical item because the compound takes on a construction-specific meaning. Here, this motion/directional verb has been extended to function as an inceptive marker.

The inceptive sense of *qilai* ‘rise-come’ in (9) and (10) is motivated by the PATH OF EVENT IS TRAJECTORY OF MOTION metaphor. If we look at the developmental path of an event as the trajectory of motion, this use can be regarded as an extension of a motion/directional verb whose initial portion of the trajectory is profiled while the later stages of the event are unspecified and thus, non-salient.

3 Semantic (in)compatibility

Some verbs used quite frequently with one paired motion/directional verb are not likely to be compounded with the other due to their semantic (in)compatibility with either of the two motion/directional verbs (such as *lai* ‘come’ vs. *qu* ‘go’, *chulai* ‘come out’ vs. *chuqu* ‘go out’). For example, *shi* ‘lose’ collocates quite easily with *qu* ‘go’ but not with *lai* ‘come’ as (11) and (12) indicate.

- (11) Ta *shiqu* le yi wei pengyou.
 3sg lose-go PERFECTIVE one CLASSIFIER friend
 ‘S/he lost a friend.’

- (12) *Ta shilai le yi wei pengyou.
 3sg lose-come PERFECITVE one CLASSIFER friend

Once someone has lost something the thing is away from her/him and it is beyond the person's reach at that time. Therefore, the meaning of losing is quite compatible with the directional meaning of being away from someone. The sentence in (12) is ungrammatical since the meaning of *shi* 'lose' contravenes the semantics of *lai* 'come' which indicates general motion toward the speaker.

In Chinese, the verb *chu* 'exit' is frequently compounded with *lai* 'come' rather than with *qu* 'go' to indicate result. This kind of usage seems to be related to the semantics of individual verbs as well. When the motion/directional verb *chulai* 'come out' is used with a motion verb, this compound verb specifies the direction of motion. However, when it is combined with a non-motion verb, it is usually used idiomatically or metaphorically to express a kind of event phase meaning such as "the result-state and completion/finality of an action" (Xiao & McEnery 2004: 165).

- (13) Ta yi fu hua hua chulai le.
 3sg one CLASSIFER picture draw exit-come PERFECITVE
 'S/he has finished drawing a picture.'

In (13), *hua* 'draw' is not a motion verb and the directional constituent *chulai* 'come out' does not indicate a spatial trajectory. It expresses the success of obtaining a result. It also adds a telic reading to an otherwise atelic verb. Here, *chulai* 'come out' has been extended to function as a kind of resultative marker.

Why is *chulai* 'come out' rather than *chuqu* 'go out' more likely to indicate both a final location as well as a resulting state? The analysis of the semantics of *lai* 'come' and *qu* 'go' may shed some light on this phenomenon.

Motion can be characterized as having a starting point and an ending point, an "origin" (source) and "destination" (goal). The intervening states between the source and goal can be called "path" or "trajectory" (Fillmore 1997). But the expression of motion is usually strongly deictic. Deixis is the linguistic phenomenon by which speakers impose an explicit or implicit reference point, usually anchored to the position of the viewer/speaker. Chinese *lai* 'come' and *qu* 'go' are strongly deictic, that is, they reference motion along a path in terms of the location of the speaker—whether the speaker is at the start (origin) or end (goal) of the path. The verb *lai* 'come' denotes motion towards the speaker or motion from the viewpoint of the subject of the sentence who is at the end destination (goal) of a path. In contrast, *qu* 'go' denotes motion away from the speaker or motion from the viewpoint of the subject of the sentence who is at the starting point (source) of a path. Usually the motion denoted by literal *lai* 'come'

is strongly bounded by the goal endpoint because the verb is deictic and strongly references the fact that the speaker or the subject of the sentence is at the end of the path. In human communication, action is often construed metaphorically like motion along a path. When motion/directional verbs are used figuratively not to express movement along a path but to indicate the unfolding of an event, they frequently take on aspectual properties, signaling degree of event realization rather than location along the path.

Motion in the real world is a basic human concept and organizing schema for a host of more abstract expressions. A schema in cognitive linguistics refers to a recurring structure within our cognitive processes which establishes patterns of understanding and reasoning and it can be considered an embodied prelinguistic structure of experience to motivate conceptual metaphor mappings (Lakoff, 1987). Spatial motion involves space and time, which are basic cognitive domains. Physical motion in the spatial domain is so prominent and productive as a cognitive schema that its linguistic expression gives rise to many non-literal or “fictive” motion expressions, in which no concrete movement of objects is involved (Talmy 2000). This is certainly true for *lai* and *qu* in Chinese.

In Chinese, *lai* ‘come’ marks centripetal motion and *qu* ‘go’ marks centrifugal. In the basic meaning of *lai* ‘come’, the destination (goal) is profiled (because it is where the speaker is and is highly salient), while in the central meaning of *qu* ‘go’, the profiled element does not usually include the destination (because motion away from the speaker need not take any set direction nor include a final goal). The extension of the verb *lai* ‘come’ to indicate a result state is motivated by domain shifting from the spatial domain to a fictive and abstract domain on the basis of some perceived commonalities and it is largely based on the metaphor OBTAINING RESULTS ARE REACHING DESTINATIONS (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lichtenberk 1991). This may provide an explanation why Chinese is much more likely to use *chulai* ‘come out’ rather than *chuqu* ‘go out’ to signal a resulting state or goal.

4 Conclusion

This paper has addressed basic and extended meanings of Chinese motion/directional verbs, which are used frequently in metaphorical extensions. It has been shown that semantic and functional extensions of Chinese motion/directional verbs are related to their basic meanings. Semantic and functional extensions could be based on some component of the total meaning of a linguistic item while other aspects of its meaning are not prominent in such extensions. Extensions of Chinese motion/directional verbs are often motivated by domain shifting from the spatial domain to the temporal domain or from the spatial domain to a fictive and abstract domain on the basis of some perceived commonalities. This paper has demonstrated that extensions of Chinese

motion/directional verbs are not random but cognitively motivated through human conceptualization.

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