

A Diachronic Investigation of the Syntactic and Semantic Features of the Supernormal Objects of Chinese “chi/shi”

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Abstract: This paper made a diachronic investigation of the development of the object of Chinese “chi/shi”. It was discovered that, besides the syntactic function—the prototypical patient, i.e. the concrete object, in its meaning “chi/shi” first extended to “abstract object, source”, and further to instrument, experience, result, purpose, place, manner, type, time”, etc, so that it presented varied meanings. This paper also analyzed the syntactic and semantic restraints of the supernormal object of Chinese “chi/shi”. From the perspective of figure-ground theory, it also interpreted the cognitive motivations for the supernormal use of the object of Chinese “chi/shi”, and analyzed the laws of its historical evolution. This study provides useful inspiration for the exploration and cognitive interpretation of the laws of the syntactic and semantic features of the diachronic evolution of Chinese verb-object construction, especially the supernormal verb-object construction, and also provides valuable reference for the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and the translation between Chinese and English of this construction.

Keywords: Supernormal object of “chi/shi”; Diachronic investigation; Restraints

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1. Introduction

Some scholars^[1] studied the phenomenon of Chinese objects from syntactic and semantic angles, like^{[2],[3],[4],[5],[6],[7]} and ^[8]. However, they mainly focused on the synchronic study, with few studies on its diachronic evolution. In particular, there is no systematic analysis and in-depth explanation of the evolution and extension of the syntactic features of the supernormal object of “chi(eat)”. Therefore, this thesis will make a systematic diachronic comparative analysis of the evolution of the syntactic features of Chinese “chi(eat)” with supernormal objects, and give a cognitive interpretation of its evolution features.

2. A diachronic study of syntactic features

We will examine the evolution of the syntactic features of the supernormal object of Chinese “shi(eat)” in four historical periods.

2.1 The syntactic features of the supernormal object of “shi” in ancient times

In ancient times, there was only the use of “shi(eat)” with an object, and there was no case of “shi(eat)” with an object. As for the corpus with the syntactic features of “shi(eat)” with objects in ancient times, we selected the classic literary works Zuo Zhuan, Guoyu and Mencius, and made specific corpus statistics. The syntactic functions of the object of “shi(eat)” in ancient Chinese mainly include concrete nouns (48), pronouns (10), abstract nouns (8), quantifiers (1), and adjectives (1). The most typical syntactic functions are concrete nouns and pronouns, while quantifiers, adjectives and abstract nouns are less typical syntactic functions. For example:

ren bu jiang shi wu yu.

No one will eat my leftovers anymore.

bei hui shi yan.

We forgot the favors of others and ate our words.

The adjective object in Example (1) omitted the specific noun object, but it is more difficult to derive the meaning in the context than quantifiers, and its conventionality is lower than quantifiers. In Example (2), “ate our words” is not a real concrete event, but an abstract figurative meaning, so it is most abnormal.

2.2 The syntactic function of the supernormal object of “shi(eat)” in medieval times

With regard to the corpus of “shi(eat)” with objects in medieval times, we selected the classic literary works “Soushen Ji”, “Shishuo Xinyu”, “Xuanguai Lu” and “Shi Yi Ji”, and made specific statistics of the corpus. The typicality hierarchy of the syntactic function of the object of “shi(eat)” is: specific noun>pronoun>quantifier>adjective. In medieval times, the supernormal syntactic functions of the object of “shi(eat)” mainly include quantifiers and adjectives, and there is no use of the abstract nouns as supernormal object. For example:

shi ban yu ban, nai huan zhi.

He ate half of it and returned the rest to her.

qi shi bu shi zhong guo zi wei.

The messenger could not eat (the food with) Chinese taste.

In Example (4), the object of “shi(eat)” is a numeral instead of a noun object, and the specific noun object is omitted, so it is not as conventional as the specific noun or pronoun in syntax. The supernormality of the abstract object “Chinese taste” in Example (5) is embodied in two aspects: 1) “shi(eat)” is not real “shi(eat)”, but “taste and experience”; 2) “Chinese taste” is also not the object of specific “shi(eat)”, which is difficult to be clearly deduced from the context.

2.3 The syntactic function of the supernormal object of “chi(eat)” in early modern times

Since early modern times, the scope of use of “shi(eat)” has been greatly reduced. “shi(eat)” has been divided into two words with different functions: “shi(eat)” and “chi(eat)”. The syntactic functions of the object of “chi(eat)” in early modern Chinese mainly include concrete nouns, pronouns, quantifiers, adjectives, verbs and abstract nouns. The most typical syntactic function is concrete nouns (316), while quantifiers (53), adjectives (33), verbs (12), pronouns (3), and abstract nouns (2) are less typical syntactic functions. For example:

si jaing yu zhong hou jaing ye jiu chi le ji wan, an xin shui jiao bu ti.

The four generals and the monkeys ate several bowls of coconut wine, and they were relieved to sleep.)

dai yu yi jian, bian chi yi da jing.

Daiyu was shocked when she saw it.

In Example (5), the object of “chi(eat)” is the quantifier “several bowls” instead of the noun object “several bowls of coconut wine”, and the specific noun object is omitted. In Example (6), the object of “chi(eat)” is a verb, which is less conventional than the adjective.

2.4 The syntactic function of the supernormal object of “chi(eat)” in modern times

With regard to the corpus of the syntactic features of “chi(eat)” with objects in modern times, we have selected the classic literary works “Long River”, “Love in a Fallen City” and “Frog”, and made specific statistics of the corpus. The syntactic functions of the object of “chi(eat)” in modern Chinese mainly include concrete nouns/pronouns, adjectives, abstract nouns, quantifiers and verbs. For example:

chi le dian yuan wang gaun si.

Ate some unjust lawsuit.

I ate some injustice lawsuit.

I got involved in an unjust lawsuit.

(8) chi dianku,dao hou lai ban ben.

Eat a little bitter, and later make a profit

(Bear hardships, and you will make a profit.)

In general, the specific process of the evolution of the syntactic function of the object of Chinese “chi(eat)” is: specific nouns/pronouns>abstract nouns>quantifiers/adjectives → specific nouns/pronouns > quantifiers > adjectives → specific nouns/pronouns > quantifiers > adjectives> abstract nouns > verbs → specific nouns/pronouns > quantifiers > adjectives > abstract nouns > verbs. In a word, through the diachronic evolution, the syntactic function types of the object of “chi(eat)” increased gradually, and the scope of syntactic use is more and more extensive. The use of these supernormal objects, especially the appearance of verb objects, has added a new semantic color to the semantics of the object of “chi(eat)”.

3. Figure-ground interpretation of the supernormality of the object of “chi(eat)”

Some scholars use the “figure-ground” theory of cognitive linguistics to explain the object substitution phenomenon of transitive verbs and the phenomenon of intransitive verbs with objects^[9]. According to cognitive linguistics, syntactic diversity can be interpreted by the cognitive principle of distinguishing between figure and ground^[10]. In the predicate part of the sentence, the verb describes the relationship between the figure and the ground. The object generally contains new information, which is more significant than the modifier such as adverbial. The object is usually regarded as the ground, and the modifier such as adverbial is regarded as the back ground. Generally speaking, the figure and ground are more prominent, while the back ground is less prominent.

In the diachronic evolution process, “abstract object and source” is first highlighted as the substitute object, then “experience, tool, result, purpose” become the substitute object, and then “place, mode, type, time”. This sequence of substitution object highlights the cognitive attention and focus of people on all aspects of “chi(eat)”. The “object and source of life” of “chi(eat)” plays an important role in people’s life, followed by the “process experience, tools, results and purposes” of “chi(eat)”, followed by the “place, manner, type and time” of “chi(eat)”, that is, especially the time or when to eat is generally not much attended to.

4. Conclusion

According to the diachronic study of the object of “chi/shi(eat)” in Chinese, in addition to being the typical patient of “chi/shi(eat)” - the specific object, the object first extends to the usage of “abstract object, source”, and then further extends to the usage of experience, tool, result, purpose, place, mode, type, time, etc., which shows that the semantic scope of the object of “chi/shi(eat)” is greater than the semantic type of the object after many other verbs. Its semantic types are more diversified, which shows the richness and long history of Chinese food culture. This study provides useful inspiration for the exploration and cognitive interpretation of the laws of the syntactic and semantic features of the diachronic evolution of Chinese verb-object construction, especially the supernormal verb-object construction, and also provides valuable reference for the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and the translation between Chinese and English of this construction.

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