

语言学论丛



A MULTIFUNCTIONAL APPROACH
TO THE SEMANTICS
OF FUNCTION WORDS

功能词的 多元语义功能 研究

高彦梅 著



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Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Function Word

In the lexis of each language, there are usually recognized two major types of words: lexical words and function words. Lexical words are also called "content words," "notional words" (Gordon & Krylova. 1980), or "full words" (*Ma's Grammar*, 1985), covering the traditional parts of speech like noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. What have been included in the present function word system are words which are usually regarded as "empty words" (*Ma's Grammar*, 1985), "form words" (Sweet, 1955), "structural words" (Gordon & Krylova. 1980), containing the traditional parts of speech like pronoun, conjunction, preposition, article, and interjection.

A definition of function words often draws special attention to their syntactic potentialities to indicate grammatical relationships. **Function words are the words in a language whose major function is to show the grammatical and structural relations between linguistic elements.**

Most grammarians agree that function words fall into a closed system, with limited number. Within each structure, each function word expresses a specific bit of grammatical information, which in isolation may seem small and insignificant, but is really quite important. Sometimes people believe that function words are relatively meaningless when compared to all the meaning expressed by lexical morphemes. But imagine how hard it would be to communicate without function words: Shakespeare's famous poem "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" would read only

“Compare summer’s day” and Oscar Wilde’s aphorism “The cynic knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing” would read only “Cynic knows price, value” if we ignored the function words.

The salience of their functions in showing grammatical meanings often results in the phenomenon of quite a few grammarians calling them grammatical words or “grammatical morphemes” (Fries, 1940, 1952; Kies, 2001). And according to these grammarians, function words mainly deliver grammatical information. For example the meaning of the preposition *by* in the sentence *The pumping station was built by George himself* expresses only the grammatical information that George was the “agent” responsible for the building of the house. However, function words, like lexical ones, can have more than one meaning. The preposition *by* in the sentence *The pumping station is by the river* has a different meaning (to indicate the location of the house). In fact, most of the functions words are multifunctional—being used in more than one structure to express more than one specific meaning. And this contributes to the fact that most of the function words are used much more frequently than most of the lexical words.

1.2 Background to the Study

Function word studies can be traced far back to the Platonic Meroi Logou tradition. In his dialogues, Plato made a fundamental contribution by dividing the Greek sentence into a nominal and a verbal component, *Onoma* and *Rhema*, which remained the primary grammatical distinction underlying syntactic analysis and word classification in all the later linguistic descriptions (Robins, 1967). With the efforts of philosophers and grammarians such as Aristotle, the Stoics, Thrax, Varro, Prescian, Wilkins, Sweet, Jespersen, Nesfield, Harris, etc., the ancient parts-of-speech system has been developed into a fixed system containing eight to nine word classes, namely noun, verb, adverb, adjective, pronoun, conjunction, preposition, interjection and article (with numerals and determiners