

SUBJECTIVITY IN MANDARIN CHINESE

THE MEANING AND USE OF CAUSAL
CONNECTIVES IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

• LI FANG •

*Subjectivity in Mandarin Chinese:
The meaning and use of causal connectives
in written discourse*

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李 芳 著

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CHAPTER *1*

Introduction

1.1 The notion of subjectivity in language

Language is generally used as a vehicle to communicate messages. The message at times contains purely objective propositions, i.e., about events or facts that can be observed in the outside world. At other times, the message also involves the speaker's point of view. In the words of Kristeva (1989: 11), the speaker sometimes 'imprints a specific seal' upon the message, even without being aware of it. Imagine a communicative context in a geography class. The teacher points at a map of the world, and talks about cities in different countries. She may state an established fact about a particular city by uttering a sentence such as (1), and perhaps she also expresses her personal evaluative judgment of that city by uttering a sentence such as (2).

(1) Beijing is the capital of China.

(2) Beijing is a wonderful city.

In the literature, the distinction between (1) and (2) is referred to in terms of the degree of subjectivity. It is generally recognized that (2) is associated with a higher degree of subjectivity than (1).

The notion of subjectivity was raised with the development of pragmatics, functional linguistics, and cognitive grammar by western linguists in the 1990s (Stein & Wright, 1995). Among these linguists, Lyons, Langacker, and Traugott deserve our special attention. They represent three major trends in the western theory of subjectivity. Lyons (1977) takes the notion of subjectivity as the speaker's expression of 'self' in an utterance. The term *self* refers to the speaker's cognition, perception, affect, attitude and intention with regard to the propositional content of the utterance. Sentence (2), for example, is considered to convey a high degree of subjectivity because the speaker expresses herself, i.e., her attitude towards the city of Beijing, which is clearly positive. By contrast, (1) does not concern the speaker's expression of *self*. Therefore, it is considered objective.

Very similar to Lyons, Traugott (1995, 2010) views subjectivity as a property of being speaker-related. Subjectivity is defined as the 'relationship to the speaker and the speaker's beliefs and attitudes' (Traugott, 2010: 30). Traugott approaches subjectivity from a diachronic perspective, paying attention to the process in which meaning becomes more and more dependent on the speaker's attitude towards the proposition, i.e., subjectification. For example, Traugott (1995: 41) mentioned that, in English, an inference has gradually been semanticised in *while* on the basis of its original temporal meaning 'during', signaling the speaker's perspective, i.e., 'surprise concerning the overlap in time or the relations between event and ground', which led to the adversative, concessive meaning 'although' (Keller, 1995).

Langacker (1990) defines subjectivity in terms of on/off-stage conceptualization. In his view, the speaker conceptualizes objects or events from either an on-stage perspective or an off-stage perspective. The off-stage conceptualization refers to the situation in which the speaker's perspective is implicit in the utterance, as in (2). Langacker considers the off-stage conceptualization maximally subjective on the grounds that the speaker is so absorbed in the perceptual experience that she loses all awareness of self (1990: 7). Compare (3) with (2).

(3) I think Beijing is an amazing city.

Sentence (3) exemplifies the on-stage conceptualization, which refers to the situation in which the speaker is explicitly referred to as a conceptualizer in the utterance. In (3), the speaker is linguistically realized by the pronoun *I*. Langacker suggests that an utterance is objectified when the speaker (as a conceptualizer) is put on stage and becomes observable. Accordingly, (3) expresses a lower degree of subjectivity than (2). Nevertheless, (3) is associated with a higher degree of subjectivity than (1). After all, (3) involves the speaker's attitude or perspective whereas (1) does not.

Langacker, Lyons, and Traugott mainly focus on the degree of subjectivity expressed by single, isolated clauses. However, subjectivity also resides in the coherence relation holding between connected clauses (Degand & Pander Maat, 2003; Pander Maat & Sanders, 2000, 2001; Sanders & Spooren, 2009, 2013; Sweetser, 1990; Zufferey, 2012). Discourse analysts have drawn our attention to the distinction between relations that can be observed in the real world, such as (4), and relations that arise in one's mind, as exemplified by (5).

- (4) Temperatures were below minus ten degrees for more than a month. As a result, many kingfishers died last year.
- (5) The lights in the house are off, so nobody is at home.

Sentences (4) and (5) are instances of causal coherence relations, which are the focus of the present study. The causal connection expressed in (4) exists between observable facts in the outside world. In (5), however, an observed fact *the lights in the house are off* gives rise to the conclusion *nobody is at home* in the speaker's mind. Discourse analysts propose to analyze this kind of difference in terms of subjectivity. Essentially, a causal relation is considered subjective when some thinking entity is involved in the construction of the relation. This thinking entity has been termed 'Subject of Consciousness' (henceforth SoC) — an animate subject, a person, whose intentionality is conceptualized as the ultimate source of the causal event, be it an act of reasoning or some real-world activity (Pander Maat & Sanders, 2001: 251). Sentence (4) does not involve an SoC: the causal relation has an origin in a different source, located in the real world. Therefore, the causal relation expressed in (4) is objective. Meanwhile, it is not difficult to see that there is an SoC in (5): the causal relation holds between an argument and a conclusion in the speaker's mind, though the speaker-SoC is not linguistically realized in the utterance. We can conclude that the causal relation expressed in (5) is associated with a higher degree of subjectivity than the one expressed in (4).

As a point to note, the SoC can be explicitly mentioned, or put on stage as well. For example, (6) is a case of on-stage conceptualization. According to Langacker's sense of subjectivity in terms of on/off-stage conceptualization, (6) is associated with a lower degree of subjectivity than (5).

(6) The lights in the house are off, so I think nobody is at home.

In addition, in free indirect speech such as (7), the narrator often introduces the perspective of other persons.

(7) The lights in the house were off, so nobody was at home, John thought.

In (7), John is the SoC responsible for the causal relation. A causal inference *nobody was at home* crossed John's mind, when he saw *the lights in the house were off*. The narrator simply reports this causal connection arising in John's mind. In the terminology of a mental space analysis, the causal relation expressed in (7) does not concern the speaker's epistemic space (Sanders & Redeker 1996; Sanders & Sweetser, 2009).¹ Only *John's* epistemic space is at stake. The notion of subjectivity has been thus extended beyond speaker-relatedness: it could be character-related as well.

1.2 Research questions

A growing number of studies on subjectivity have focused on the class of linguistic expressions generally referred to as causal connectives. In many languages, there is more than one causal connective at the language user's disposal. In English, for example, causal connectives include *because, since, so, as a result*, by means of which the speaker can explicitly mark that the connected clauses are causally (rather than merely additively) related to each other. Usage-based studies into causal connectives of Dutch, French, German, Polish, and Mandarin Chinese (abbr. Chinese) have pointed to a common phenomenon: causal connectives show some overlap in their usage in certain contexts, but are not always interchangeable without changing the meaning of

the sentence (Deng, 2007; Guo, 2006; X. Li, 2009; Zhao, 2003; for European causal connectives, see the overview in Sanders & Sweetser, 2009 and in Stukker & Sanders, 2012). For instance, the overlap between the use of *so* and *as a result* is apparent in (8), whereas (9) reveals that these two causal connectives are not fully identical.

(8) It rained heavily the whole day, *so* / *as a result* the picnic was canceled.

(9) Peter wants to see you, *so* / **as a result* he will probably ask you for an appointment.

Findings from a group of European studies have consistently shown that causal connectives are associated with varying degrees of subjectivity, and that is why the speaker/author prefers one causal connective over another under given circumstances such as (9) (Degand & Pander Maat, 2003; Evers-Vermeul, Degand, Fagard & Mortier, 2011; Pit, 2003; Spooren, Sanders, Huiskes & Degand, 2010; Zufferey, 2012). In (9), the relation holds at the argument level, so speakers prefer to use a linguistic marker that is encoded with a higher degree of subjectivity (e.g., *so*). Similar to *so*, French *car* and *puisque*, and German *denn* (all translated by *because*) mark higher degrees of subjectivity, and thus they are typically used to express relations as in (9), which are constructed with high involvement of the speaker or some other SoC (Stukker & Sanders, 2010a, 2012). In contrast, French *parce que* and German *weil* (both translated by *because*) mark lower degrees of subjectivity, and are typically used to express objective causal relations as manifested in (8). Objective causal relations are not intended for argumentation, but focus on describing connections between events or circumstances observable in the world.

It is assumed that linguistic categorization reflects human cognition (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Accordingly, subjectivity has been proposed to be

cognitively relevant, in that it organizes our knowledge of causality and use of causal connectives, at least in several European languages (Canestrelli, 2013; Sanders and Spooren, 2009, submitted; Stukker & Sanders, 2012; van Veen, 2011).

Findings from discourse processing and language acquisition have provided support for the idea that subjectivity is cognitively relevant. It is found that causal relations or connectives that are associated with different degrees of subjectivity show different patterns in online processing and language acquisition. Psycholinguistic work has discovered that objective causal relations or connectives are processed faster than subjective causal relations or connectives during online reading (Canestrelli, 2013; Canestrelli, Mak & Sanders, 2013; Noordman & De Blijzer, 2000; Traxler, Bybee & Pickering, 1997a; Traxler, Sanford, Aked & Moxey, 1997b). Research on child language has found that objective causal relations are acquired before subjective causal relations (Evers-Vermeul, 2005; Evers-Vermeul & Sanders, 2011; Spooren & Sanders, 2008; van Veen, 2011). These findings from language acquisition and discourse processing can be explained by the subjective complexity hypothesis (Sanders, 2005): subjective relations are cognitively more complex than objective relations, which is why the former take longer to acquire and process than the latter.

Like other languages, Chinese displays a rich lexical repertoire of causal connectives. In the literature, the Chinese lexicon of causality has been studied with different approaches. Consequently, different accounts have been produced as to the way in which one causal connective differs from another. A fundamental question that the present dissertation takes interest in is whether it is feasible to study the full set of Chinese causal connectives with the subjectivity approach rooted in cognitive linguistics. In other words, we investigate the extent to which the alleged cognitively-plausible subjectivity account for connective use is generalizable to causal connectives

in Mandarin discourse. As a first step in testing the generalizability of the subjectivity account, a review of Chinese literature on causal connectives and causal coherence relations will be presented. The research questions for this literature review are as follows.

Research question 1

How do Chinese linguists define subjectivity? Can their approaches be related to western approaches of subjectivity?

Research question 2

Which analytical categories have been used in previous studies on Chinese causal connectives? Can these categories be related to analyses in terms of subjectivity, and if so, how?

Research question 3

Do Chinese and European studies address the issue of subjectivity in causality with similar methods?

European languages show clear differences in the way they divide the domain of causality according to subjectivity. For example, in English there is a causal connective *because* that is very general in use, whereas several Dutch causal connectives are specific in meaning and use. Existing findings based on English data suggest that the demarcation of subjective and objective categories is realized by cue phrases rather than connectives (Knott & Dale, 1994; Knott & Sanders, 1998): *for that reason* (objective) and *it follows that* (subjective). In Polish, causality is most typically expressed via epistemic or intersubjective construals marked with connectives *bo* ‘because’ and *to* ‘then’, and it seldom focuses on objective relations in the real world

(Dancygier, 2009). This type of observation gives rise to the following question: How is causality categorized in Mandarin Chinese, a language that is typologically different from the European languages? We approach this question by conducting a corpus-based investigation into the meaning and use of Chinese causal connectives in terms of subjectivity. The research question for the corpus-based investigation is as follows.

Research question 4

Do Chinese causal connectives show systematic variation in terms of the degree of subjectivity they encode? If so, how? Are there language-specific properties in this respect?

Another important issue the present corpus-based research aims to address is related to genre, conventionally defined as a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes identifiable and mutually understood by the members of the discourse community (Swales, 1990; Trosborg, 1997). This means that although the writer has a lot of freedom to use linguistic resources, she must conform to certain standard practices within the boundaries of a particular genre (Bhatia, 1993: 14). Swales (1990: 58) claims that genre, characterized by some set of recognizable communicative purposes, shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and constrains choices of content and style. These ideas give rise to the following question: Does genre have an impact on the meaning and use of causal connectives, in accordance with the degree of subjectivity that the text (or text category) is intended to express given its communicative purpose?

Genre-specific properties of connective use have not yet been investigated systematically, although studies on French, German, and Dutch causal connectives