**Bidirectional cycles of change between modals and conditionals**

First, I will show that two Chinese modals and two conditionals have developed into conditionals and modals (Kuo 2022, 2024). Second, I will consider the role of low frequency in such bidirectional cycles. Finally, I will discuss its implications, especially for Detges’ (2020) satellite model of cyclic change.

Each of the modals and conditionals has a different history, but all undergo change in similar “indirect speech act” constructions where they mean ‘must; only if’ and direct the addressee to perform the act described in the first clause in order to achieve the goal described or implied in the second clause. The constructions are critical contexts where change is observed as well as contexts of “morphosyntactic vagueness” (Kuo 2021) where no distributional or functional distinction could be posited between modals and conditionals. Specifically, the relevant modals and conditionals in the constructions are performatively equivalent (i.e. they perform the same speech act).

Compared to canonical modals and conditionals, the relevant modals and conditionals are less frequent and their new conditional/modal uses are short-lived. I hypothesise that the bidirectional cycles are enabled by low frequencies. First, cognitively, low frequency items tend to have weaker, vaguer mental representations, which allow them to be recategorised more easily. Second, pragmatically, as the constructions are indirect speech acts, newer modal/conditional items are used in them presumably because they are perceived to be less direct than older ones (see Mauri & Sansò 2011 for the tendency ‘indirect act’ > ‘direct act’). A preference for newer items in the constructions may follow from a preference for indirectness, which at the same time might prevent an item from becoming more entrenched or prototypical.

The findings of the paper generally support Detges’ (2020) model. First, cyclic change tends to involve satellites (i.e. non-prototypical members).Second, it is motivated by rhetorical uses. However, whereas Detges does not view the existing grammatical system as a potentially strong influence on cyclic change, the fact that morphosyntactic vagueness between modals and conditionals is a systemic and panchronic phenomenon in Chinese (Kuo 2021), but not observed elsewhere, suggests that the grammatical system should not be overlooked. Finally, while Detges and many others have emphasised the role of ‘overuse’ in (cyclical) change, this paper highlights that ‘underuse’, associated with indirectness, may be a factor: a preference for underused items might drive short-lived cyclic changes.

**References**

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