

Chinese conditionals: Asymmetry, cyclicity and periphery

Chinese clause-initial and clause-final conditional protasis connectives ('conditionals') are numerically asymmetrical: Eifring (1995: 373) lists, non-exhaustively, 27 clause-initial ones and 2 clause-final ones. The former developed from modals, verbs of supposing and verbs of semblance; and the latter, nominalised topic and temporal markers (Jiang 2004; Yap et al. 2017). The developments, especially of clause-initial ones, though recurrent, were not always strictly cyclic (i.e. not always associated with loss; cf. Pons Bordería & Llopis 2020). Three pragmatics-oriented explanations for this asymmetry and its origins are proposed.

First, their sources are functionally asymmetrical. Generally, modals and verbs are more 'pragmatics-heavy': they are more likely to be used rhetorically than nominalised markers, which, rather than performing rhetorical functions themselves, set the scene for the following discourse and rhetorical functions. The higher number of clause-initial conditionals, which originated from modals and verbs, may reflect this functional distinction; see Bybee's (2002) proposal that main clauses are more innovative as they are more interactive than subordinate ones.

Second, one feature of clause-initial conditionals, but not clause-final ones, is that many are etymological doublets, which resulted from morphological fusion between established and new conditionals. Such fusion increases the number of conditionals, as fused and unfused conditionals may co-exist (e.g. *bi* 'must' > 'if'; *ruo* 'if' + *bi* 'if' > *ruobi* 'if'). Fusion is more likely in initial position as null subjects, licensed pragmatically, often erode category boundaries (Kuo 2022) and less likely in final position presumably because nominalised markers mark discourse boundaries (Wang 2017).

Third, recurrent changes may seem prevalent in Chinese and in initial position because Chinese relies more on Givón's (1979) 'pragmatic mode' of communication (vs. 'syntactic'), where the preference for context-dependent coding strategies and tolerance for morphosyntactic underspecification encourage the recruitment of new markers, especially clause-initial conditionals, for rhetorical purposes. That many recurrent changes are not strictly cyclic might also be due to this pragmatics-motivated morphosyntactic open-endedness: New markers may emerge 'unopposed' even in the presence of various established markers.

References

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