

The Imperfective –*ZHE* in Northwestern Chinese Dialects: A Typological Study

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Abstract

In the vast majority of northwestern Chinese dialects (NWDs) spoken in Shanxi 山西, Shaanxi 陕西, Qinghai 青海, Ningxia 宁夏, Gansu 甘肃, Xinjiang 新疆, and Inner Mongolia 内蒙古, the aspect marker *-ZHE* 着 has a number of peculiar characteristics. The most prominent one is that it takes a special position where no verb suffix is expected to occur, i.e., it is placed after the object (“V+O+*-ZHE*”) rather than immediately following the verb (“V+*-ZHE*+O”) as in Standard Mandarin and other varieties of Chinese. Furthermore, *-ZHE* can co-occur with much more types of verb constellations in NWDs than in other Chinese dialects, including stative verbs (e.g., *shi* 是 ‘copula’, *you* 有 ‘have’, *zhidao* 知道 ‘know’) and achievement verbs (e.g., *si* 死 ‘die’, *ying* 赢 ‘win’, *lai* 来 ‘come’). In addition, the component verbs in verb-chaining constructions, such as serial verb constructions, are often found accompanied by *-ZHE* in the dialects spoken in Shaanxi, Gansu and Xinjiang, even when the verb does not signal an ongoing action or a state of being. This thesis argues that the peculiarity found in NWDs is a result of syntactic change induced by the contact with the non-Han languages spoken in Northwest China, including Mongolian, Turkic and Tibetan languages. The contact-induced change presents an interesting case illuminating the very nature of language as a self-organizing and adaptive system. The “V+O+*-ZHE*” configuration reflects a perfect compromise between the two types of languages in contact: in such a

configuration, the canonical VO order of Chinese is maintained, while by moving the verb suffix to the clause-final position, it also complies with the verb-final trait of the Altaic languages.