

Spatial Extension: Directional Verbs in Cantonese

by

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Abstract

The present study examines the syntax and semantics of directional verbs in Cantonese. Directional verbs are verbs that denote movements with an emphasis on direction. Twelve directional verbs are investigated in this study and they are soeng 上 'move up', lok 落 'move down', ceot 出 'move out', jap 入 'move in', hoi 開 'move away', maai 埋 'move close', gwo 過 'move over', hei 起 'move up', dou 到 'arrive', faan 翻 'move back', lai 嚟 'come' and heoi; 去 'go'. A cognitive approach is adopted to account for the meaning extensions as well as a number of syntactic phenomena exhibited by the above directional verbs. It will be shown that the use of spatial verbs is extended from the spatial domain to other abstract domains, expressing a number of non-spatial meanings such as the temporal, geographical, social, discourse and modal meanings. In particular, it is observed that the three components of a physical movement, i.e. source-path-goal, are systematically mapped to the three components of a temporal situation, i.e. starting point-process-endpoint. Some of the temporal meanings are further grammaticalized to aspectual meanings.

The principle of iconic-distance states that the more relevant the meaning of a morpheme is to the verb, the closer it appears to the verb. The meaning of causation is highly relevant to the meaning of a verb as the situation expressed by the verb changes according to the role of the participants in the situation. It is found that a

directional verb forms a compound with the verb of which it functions as a complement only when it used as a causative verb. In contrast, when a directional verb exhibits a directional use, it does not form a compound with its preceding verb.

Cantonese has a tri-syllabic inchoative form, i.e. *heisoenglai* 起上嚟. Tracing the origin of *heisoenglai* 起上嚟, it is found that in the late nineteenth century, there existed in the language two other tri-syllabic inchoative forms, i.e. *heiceotlai* 起出嚟 and *heifaanlai* 起翻嚟. Based on the internal structure and the chronology of appearance, it is suggested that the regular use of the three-element strings, i.e. *faan* 翻 + Y + Z, toward the end of the nineteenth century set precedence for the emergence of these three inchoative markers.