

The evolution of a topic marker in Wu (Chinese) dialects

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The morpheme 是 (shì in Mandarin, zì in Shanghainese (Wu) dialect) is attested in multiple uses across Chinese dialects and throughout the history of Chinese: copula, adjective, determiner, affirmative particle, demonstrative pronoun, among others. Two of the oldest and most widespread uses are as a copula (Wang 1937) and as a focus marker (Shi & Xu 2001). A later development is the emergence of 是 as a topic marker in Northern Wu dialects, as evidenced in the behavior of its Shanghainese reflex zì (Han 2010).

We examine the use of 是 in a novella (Red Pear Blossom) written in 1610 during the Ming Dynasty when the topic-marking use first appeared. Copular uses (66 instances) and focus marking uses (186 instances) are clearly in evidence, but so is the emergent topic marking use (65 occurrences). The corpus data afford us an opportunity to closely examine the contexts in which 是 is being used and to identify commonalities in the context of use and the semantic-pragmatic functions associated with each use. We rely on a combination of quantitative methods (chi-squared tests, association plots, and configuration frequency analysis, carried out using the statistical software program R) and qualitative methods to arrive at a better understanding of how the three uses of 是 are distinct from one another. Even though the copula and topic marking uses appear very similar in some respects (e.g., the element to the left is typically given information while the element to the right is typically a comment on the element to the left), our analysis reveals that the two uses preferentially select different syntactic categories. As a copula, 是 prefers a pronoun (on the left) and a noun (on the right), where as a topic marker it most prefers an adverb (on the left) and a clause (on the right). In addition to the basic topic marking role of 是, a range of additional, less frequent functions can be associated with 是 as a topic marker: marking the topic as emphatic, counter-expected, contrastive, conditional. We employ the ideas and notation of Construction Grammar to help visualize the emergence of the topic marking functions, as evidenced in our data.

Our study provides a further case study in the emergence of topic markers from copula and focus structures (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2002). Our study has the particular virtue of drawing upon historical data to reconstruct earlier stages, rather than simply relying upon imagined intermediate stages as is often the case in grammaticalization studies. Finally, the grammaticalization of 是 into a topic marker is consistent with Hopper's (1991;1996) five principles of grammaticalization: principle of layering, principle of divergence, principle of specialization, principle of decategorization, and principle of persistence.

[450 words]

Key words: grammaticalization, topic-comment, copula, focus, Chinese

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