

Synonyms are not the same – A corpus-based study of Mandarin-Chinese Prepositions

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Synonyms tend to have the same meanings. For example, both *zài jia lǐ* and *zài jia zhōng* mean “in a house.” in Mandarin. However, do words have the same meanings, such as *zài ...lǐ* and *zài ...zhōng* in Mandarin circumfixes, behave differently? In this talk I try to answer two questions related to this issue. One concerns differences between literal and metaphorical meanings in synonyms. A second question is why synonyms such as *lǐ* and *zhōng* are grammaticalized in different ways.

This research focuses on two Mandarin prepositions in fixed frames: [*zài* ‘at’ ... *lǐ* ‘inside’] and [*zài* ‘at’ ... *zhōng* ‘middle’]. Both realize the meaning *in* in Mandarin Chinese. Chung et. al. (2012) have used the Chinese Gigaword Corpus 2.0 to provide evidence that people use *lǐ* and *zhōng* in different ways. This research goes a step further by using Academic Sinica Balanced Corpus 4.0 to make a cross-corpus comparison. In the data set (1000 for *zài ...lǐ* 1000 for *zài ...zhōng*), 78.7% of occurrences of the construction [*zài* ‘at’ ... *lǐ* ‘inside’] is used in its literal meaning like container or location. In contrast, 65% of the instances of the construction [*zài* ‘at’ ... *zhōng* ‘middle’] is used in its metaphorical meaning like knowledge or text. From these data, a complementary relationship exists between [*zài* ‘at’ ... *lǐ* ‘inside’] and [*zài* ‘at’ ... *zhōng* ‘middle’].

In order to provide further evidences for differences between [*zài* ‘at’ ... *lǐ* ‘inside’] and [*zài* ‘at’ ... *zhōng* ‘middle’], the researcher uses collocation analysis in R package to investigate the distribution of nouns for these two circumfixes. Concrete nouns like *zuǐ* (mouth) and *fáng* (house) have preference for *zài ...lǐ*, but *zài ...zhōng* is preferred to state abstract nouns, such as *shēng mìng* (life) and *hēi àn* (darkness). In conclusion, this study not only suggests people tend to use Chinese synonymous clusters in different ways but contributes to further methodology for analysis of synonymous words.

References

Chung, Siaw-fong, Ming-chien Lee., Yen-yu Lin.& Ming-che Hsieh. 2012. Cross linguistic literal and metaphorical comparisons of IN (SIDE): A perspective from Mandarin, Malay, and English. In the *The Meaning of P*. Bochum Universität, Germany.