

The Principled Polysemy of Chinese Word “Dao”

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The Chinese word “dao” (到: *arrive, to, until*, etc.) has been a puzzle for Chinese linguists and language learners due to its syntactic and semantic complexity. It has been categorized as a main verb meaning “arrive”, a preposition meaning “to” when following a verb, a verb complement to indicate the realization of the action, a co-verb, and an adverb. It expresses spatial motion, temporal situations, and abstract notions such as perceptual and even mental activities. To date, no study has offered a complete and unified analysis of its many meanings and functions. Indeed, a corpus search using the corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics of Peking University (CCLPU) revealed several senses which have not previously been identified in the literature. Using the findings of this corpus analysis, this study explores the full range of “dao”’s multiple senses and functions and posits a systematic, motivated polysemy analysis of “dao”. Based on the Cognitive Linguistics criteria for determining the primary sense (Langacker, 1987; Tyler & Evans, 2003), I determine the primary sense of the word “dao” is the motion event: *arrive*, i.e., *moving to a goal*. Following the model of principled polysemy proposed by Tyler (Tyler and Evans, 2003; Tyler, 2012), I demonstrate how all of the identified distinct senses of the word “dao” are extended from the primary sense. The analysis revealed that the senses of “dao” fall into two categories: “moving to a goal” (i.e. an oriented trajector (TR) moving towards a landmark (LM)), and “to a goal” (i.e. an oriented TR facing a LM). The latter cluster is treated as semantically extended from the primary sense, i.e. the spatial scene of an oriented TR moving towards a LM. Based on Langacker (1987)’s proposal of energy flow, when an oriented TR faces a LM even without physical-spatial motion, energy in the form of attention flows from the TR to the LM. The object of attention generated from the physical-spatial configuration of a TR facing a LM enables the semantic extension of “dao” from the first cluster to the second cluster, that is, from “dao”’s primary sense of a motion event to senses that do not involve motion. I argue that the semantic extensions of “dao” between the two clusters and within each cluster are not random but motivated by established cognitive processes such as metaphor or metonymy which reflect human spatio-physical experience and conceptualization. Finally, the findings of this study offer insights into several other highly polysemous Chinese verbs/particles. These findings hold promise for developing more complete, systematic explanations which can be adapted to the teaching of Chinese verbs/particles.

Keywords: Chinese word “dao” (到), motion event, semantic extension, principled polysemy, conceptualization