

Reconstructing early Chinese dialectal grammar: A study of directional verbs in Cantonese

Carine Yuk-man YIU
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
yuiu@ust.hk

In the last two decades, scholars showed much interest in studying dialectal materials compiled in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Yue 1993, 2001 and Cheung 1997, 2001, 2006, 2009 on Cantonese, Chappell and Lamarre 2005 on Hakka, Qian N-R 2004 on Wu, Lien C-F 2002, 2005, 2009 on Min). However, no comparative study on these early dialectal texts has ever been carried out to this day, a gap that is filled by the present study.

Talmy (2000) proposed that languages can be classified into verb-framed and satellite-framed languages. The former expresses the notion of path in the main verb such as the Spanish verb *salió* ‘exit’ in (1) while the latter in a satellite such as the English verb particle *out* in (2).

- (1) la botella *salió* flotando. ‘The bottle exited floating.’
the bottle exit floating
- (2) The bottle floated *out*.

Scholars (cf. Li 1993, Ma 2008) suggested that the Chinese language has undergone a typological shift from a verb-framed to a satellite-framed language. For example, in an agentive motion event, Classical Chinese can express path in the main verb (*chui* ‘cause to move out’ in (3)), while Mandarin can only encode path in a complement (*chū lái* ‘out-come’ in (4)).

- (3) wǒ *chui* wǒ jū... (Shǐjīng 168 from Xu 2006:65) ‘We bring out our carriages...’
we bring-out our carriage
- (4) wǒ bǎ chē kāi chū lái. ‘I move out the car.’
I BA car open out come

A close examination of the use of directional verbs in early Cantonese and Mandarin texts shows that the agentive use of directional verbs is exhibited in the former (cf. 5) but not in the latter (cf. 6), a contrast that is still observed nowadays.

- (5) aa³ Ling⁴, giu³ gu¹lei¹ ceot¹ kiu² (Ball 1902) ‘A Ling, tell the coolies to get out the chair.’
A Ling tell coolies get-out chair the chair.’
- (6) qǔ chū jǐ ge míngpiàn (*Chun E Shi*) ‘take out a few name cards’
take out few CL name card

This study further compares the use of six directional verbs in *Jesou Jinhang Cyutjiu* and *Chun E Shi*, Cantonese and Mandarin texts compiled in 1863 and around 1910s, with their corresponding use in ‘Chinese Pear Stories’. Specifically, a frequency count is used to find out the number of examples of the main verb use and the complement use of the six directional verbs. If the verb use of the directional verbs in a dialect is higher than the complement use, the dialect is considered resembling more a verb-framed language; if the complement use is higher, the dialect is said to be closer to a satellite-framed language. The result illustrates that (i) the verb use of some of the directional verbs in both early Cantonese and early Mandarin texts is higher than their complement use, a result that contrasts with the finding in Chinese Pear Stories, in which the complement use is higher, (ii) the verb use of all six directional verbs in early Cantonese is higher than that in early Mandarin, and (iii) the verb use and the complement use of a directional verb correlates with the type of events in which it is used, namely, agentive, non-agentive and self-agentive motion in both early and modern dialects. The conclusion reached seems to suggest that Cantonese exhibits more features of verb-framed languages than Mandarin in more than a century ago and at present despite that both are heading toward the direction to becoming satellite-framed languages.