A Linguistic Analysis of

Selected Morpho-syntactic Features of Spoken Mandarin

Angela Elizabeth Cook
B.A., M.A.

Languages and Linguistics
Arts, Education and Law
Griffith University

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2013
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Professor Deborah Cao, for her constant academic support and supervision, for helping to keep me focussed when I got distracted or started to go off on a tangent, and for continually demanding a high standard of academic scholarship. Throughout the seven years of my candidature she has maintained a fine balance between allowing me the freedom to pursue my own line of research inquiry and guiding me in the right direction. I am particularly grateful for the level of understanding and empathy Debbie has shown for my family circumstances, for her consistent and patient support through the peaks and troughs of the thesis writing process and for her calm acceptance of the fact that family commitments meant that I was not always able to give my dissertation the high priority she probably thought it deserved.

My thanks also go to Emeritus Professor Mary Farquhar, my associate supervisor in the initial stages, for her input into critical early decisions about focus and direction. I appreciate the different perspectives she brought to many of our discussions, and I wish her well in her retirement.

I would also like to thank Associate Professor Michael Haugh, my associate supervisor in the latter stages, for prompting me to articulate the unifying thread of my thesis and for assisting me to place my research within the overall context of the existing body of literature. Michael was very helpful in motivating me to hone my key arguments and bring them into sharper relief.

Thanks are also due to my many Mandarin-speaking friends and colleagues, in particular Melody Chang and Julia Han, for acting as a sounding board for my ideas, analyses and interpretations of the data and for providing me with valuable feedback.

As far as non-academic support is concerned, I would like to thank my parents, Janet and David Cook, for countless hours of child minding and for their readiness to step into the breach whenever the going got tough.
I would also like to thank my husband, Stefan Preissler, for years of unstinting moral support and encouragement. Without his willingness to share home duties this thesis would not have been completed.

I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of my grandfathers, David Berry and Jack Cook, neither of whom would have encouraged me to undertake a PhD in Chinese linguistics, but both of whom (I like to think) would have been proud of my achievements in the end.
Signed statement of originality

I certify that this work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research that has been written by me. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. Any assistance that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been appropriately acknowledged.

Angela Cook (S2187844)

5th September 2013
Abstract

This dissertation carries out a linguistic analysis of three selected morpho-syntactic features of Modern Standard Chinese using a corpus of spoken data. It aims to contribute to a better understanding of Mandarin Chinese grammar by making two quite different contributions to the body of research.

Firstly, it provides a reconceptualised analysis of the existing literature on morpho-syntactic language change in Modern Standard Chinese, which is presented both diagrammatically and in textual form. The reconceptualisation of previous findings reveals some important and interesting correlations and connections that were not immediately obvious from the existing literature, owing to the disparate and ad hoc nature in which they have often been presented. It is hoped that a flow-on effect of this unified classification schema will be to encourage a more systematic, organised and manageable approach to conducting and reporting on future research into Chinese morpho-syntactic language change.

The second contribution is a detailed grammatical analysis of selected morpho-syntactic features of Mandarin Chinese, which is carried out using a corpus of spoken data assembled especially for the purposes of this research. The corpus consists of transcripts of the chat show ‘A Date with Luyu’ broadcast between January and September 2011, and totals over 500,000 characters in size. The three features selected for this study are the plural suffix *men*, the passive marker *bei* and the copula *shi*. These three features have been the topic of a substantial quantity of previous research; however, it was felt that certain aspects of their use had not been explored or explained sufficiently. And indeed, the data analysis in this thesis shows that previous analyses of the use of the three morpho-syntactic features under investigation have generally been incomplete or inadequate in some way. It is hoped that the fine-grained analysis of empirical data undertaken in this thesis will add to the growing body of corpus-based and data-driven research in encouraging other linguists interested in exploring issues in Mandarin grammar to conduct further research adopting a similar approach.

Careful and systematic examination of the data reveals that the particular linguistic features under discussion are both less sensitive to a number of constraints outlined in the mainstream literature and, at the same time, more responsive to a range of different
contextual factors, many of which seem to have been overlooked in previous treatments of Mandarin grammar. In particular, it is found that many non-grammatical factors play a role in determining the behaviour of the three selected morpho-syntactic features. The analysis also demonstrates that spoken data can reveal interesting insights into the complexity of the grammatical system, insights that may possibly not be so readily apparent on the basis of written texts alone. This suggests that other morpho-syntactic features of Modern Standard Chinese could likewise benefit from a detailed analysis of their behaviour in spoken interactions.
# Table of Contents

1. **INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 6

   1.1. **BACKGROUND** .......................................................................................................... 7
       1.1.1. *The place of Chinese in the family tree* ............................................................... 7
       1.1.2. *Typology of Chinese* ............................................................................................ 12
       1.1.3. *History of interest in Chinese linguistics* ............................................................. 13
       1.1.4. *Need for research into the spoken language* ....................................................... 17
   1.2. **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS** .............................................................................. 19
   1.3. **RESEARCH QUESTIONS** ............................................................................................ 20
   1.4. **METHODOLOGY** ....................................................................................................... 20
       1.4.1. *Step one: morpho-syntactic schema* ................................................................... 21
       1.4.2. *Step two: data analysis* ....................................................................................... 25
   1.5. **THESIS STRUCTURE** .................................................................................................. 35

2. **RECENT RESEARCH INTO MANDARIN CHINESE SYNTAX AND MORPHOLOGY** .......... 37

   2.1. **BACKGROUND** .......................................................................................................... 37
       2.1.1. *History of Wenyan and Baihua* ......................................................................... 37
       2.1.2. *Cultural and historical importance of the written language* ............................. 39
       2.1.3. *Relationship between written and spoken forms of Chinese* .......................... 40
       2.1.4. *Evolution of Putonghua and its status today* ..................................................... 41
       2.1.5. *Linguistic variation between different spoken standards* ............................... 44
   2.2. **RESEARCH INTO THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF WRITTEN MODERN STANDARD CHINESE** ......................................................................................................................... 46
       2.2.1. *Major researchers in the general field of Chinese grammar* ............................. 46
       2.2.2. *Contributions to an understanding of specific morpho-syntactic structures and processes* .................................................................................................................. 49
   2.3. **RESEARCH INTO THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF SPOKEN MODERN STANDARD CHINESE** .......................................................................................................................... 62
       2.3.1. *Major researchers in the field of spoken Mandarin grammar* ......................... 64
       2.3.2. *Contributions to an understanding of specific morpho-syntactic structures and processes* .................................................................................................................. 65
   2.4. **SUMMARY AND CURRENT RESEARCH TRENDS** .................................................... 73

3. **MORPHO-SYNTACTIC SCHEMA: A RECONCEPTUALISED ANALYSIS OF MORPHO-SYNTACTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN MODERN STANDARD CHINESE** .......................................................... 75

   3.1. **INTRODUCTION** .......................................................................................................... 75

Angela Cook  
14/02/2014  
Page 1
Table of Contents

3.2. MORPHOLOGICAL SCHEMA ........................................................................................................... 76
  3.2.1. Derivational morphology .......................................................................................................... 78
  3.2.2. Inflectional morphology ........................................................................................................... 80

3.3. SYNTACTIC SCHEMA ...................................................................................................................... 82
  3.3.1. Ellipsis .................................................................................................................................. 84
  3.3.2. Conversion ............................................................................................................................. 86
  3.3.3. Grammaticalization ............................................................................................................... 89
  3.3.4. Noun phrases ......................................................................................................................... 91
  3.3.5. Verb phrases .......................................................................................................................... 93
  3.3.6. Sentence structure ................................................................................................................ 94

3.4. SUMMARY ..................................................................................................................................... 98

4. THE PLURAL SUFFIX MEN .............................................................................................................. 100

4.1. CONVENTIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE PLURAL SUFFIX MEN ........................................................... 100

4.2. RESEARCH FINDINGS .................................................................................................................... 103
  4.2.1. Frequency analysis ................................................................................................................ 103
  4.2.2. Use with explicit number ...................................................................................................... 106
  4.2.3. Collective marker .................................................................................................................. 107
  4.2.4. Diminutive connotations ....................................................................................................... 109
  4.2.5. Information structure ........................................................................................................... 112
  4.2.6. Semantic distinction ............................................................................................................. 118

4.3. DISCUSSION .................................................................................................................................. 121
  4.3.1. Syntactic and semantic constraints on the plural marker men ............................................. 121
  4.3.2. The many and varied functions of the plural marker men .................................................. 122
  4.3.3. Lexical diffusion .................................................................................................................... 123
  4.3.4. Optional or obligatory? ......................................................................................................... 127
  4.3.5. Summary ................................................................................................................................ 127

5. THE PASSIVE MARKER BEI .............................................................................................................. 129

5.1. CONVENTIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE PASSIVE MARKER BEI .......................................................... 129

5.2. RESEARCH FINDINGS .................................................................................................................... 133
  5.2.1. Semantic and pragmatic constraints on the use of bei ......................................................... 134
  5.2.2. Morfo-syntactic constraints on the use of bei ...................................................................... 147

5.3. DISCUSSION .................................................................................................................................. 151
  5.3.1. Implications of semantic and pragmatic findings ................................................................. 151
  5.3.2. Implications of morfo-syntactic findings ............................................................................. 153
Table of Contents

5.3.3.  Summary ............................................................................................................. 154

6.  THE COPULA SHI ............................................................................................... 156

6.1.  CONVENTIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE COPULA SHI ...................................... 156
6.2.  RESEARCH FINDINGS ....................................................................................... 159
   6.2.1.  The use of the copula with adjectives ................................................................. 159
   6.2.2.  The use of the copula with the locative zai ......................................................... 166
6.3.  DISCUSSION ......................................................................................................... 172
   6.3.1.  Marker of contrastive prominence ...................................................................... 172
   6.3.2.  Extended copula function .................................................................................. 173
   6.3.3.  Replacement of locative copula ......................................................................... 175
   6.3.4.  Conventionalised forms ...................................................................................... 175
   6.3.5.  Summary ........................................................................................................... 177

7.  ISSUES IN MANDARIN CHINESE MORPHO-SYNTAX AND THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS THEREOF ........................................................................................................... 180

7.1.  OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS ......................................................................... 180
7.2.  EXPLAINING THE FINDINGS .............................................................................. 182
   7.2.1.  Discrepancies between descriptive analysis and actual practice .................... 183
   7.2.2.  Linguistic variation ............................................................................................ 186
   7.2.3.  Language contact .............................................................................................. 201
   7.2.4.  Language change .............................................................................................. 219
7.3.  SUMMARY ............................................................................................................ 222

8.  CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................ 224

8.1.  SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS ......................................................................... 224
8.2.  CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD ........................................................................ 226
8.3.  THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS .......................................................................... 228
   8.3.1.  Implications for the study of grammar ................................................................. 228
   8.3.2.  Implications for language variation, contact and change ................................. 230
8.4.  PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS ................................................................................. 231
   8.4.1.  Implications for Chinese language pedagogy ...................................................... 232
   8.4.2.  Implications for translating and interpreting ....................................................... 233
   8.4.3.  Implications for language planning ..................................................................... 233
   8.4.4.  Implications for general linguistics .................................................................. 234
8.5.  LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ............................................................................................................................. 234
   8.5.1.  Language variation ............................................................................................. 234
Index of Figures and Tables

FIGURE 1: MORPHOLOGICAL SCHEMA.................................................................76

FIGURE 2: SYNTACTIC SCHEMA.........................................................................83

FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF INDICATORS ACROSS SOCIOECONOMIC CLASSES .................................................200

FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF MARKERS ACROSS SOCIOECONOMIC CLASSES ..................................................200

FIGURE 5: THE S-CURVE PATTERN OF LANGUAGE CHANGE .................................................................221

TABLE 1: USE OF THE PLURAL SUFFIX MEN IN EPISODES OF ‘A DATE WITH LUYU’ FROM 2011 (TOTAL = 148) ........................................................................................................................................104

TABLE 2: PROPORTION OF TIMES PLURAL MEANING IS SIGNALLED BY PLURAL SUFFIX WITH SELECTED HUMAN NOUNS IN EPISODES OF ‘A DATE WITH LUYU’ FROM 2011 ..........................................................125

TABLE 1: MOST COMMON ADVERSE + DISPOSAL VERBAL MEANINGS USED WITH THE PASSIVE MARKER BEI (TOTAL = 71) ........................................................................................................................................139