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# On Hakka SI: Categorical shift and semantic extension

**Abstract**

   The lexeme SI, meaning 'die', has frequently been used as an evaluative indicator, which delineates an extreme extent. All the distinct grammatical forms of SI have common semantic-pragmatic properties—each sense involving a speaker's articulation of his expectation contravention. With regard to the phenomena, this study focuses on the semantic and cognitive structure of SI as an evaluative indicator in Hakka—particularly on the conceptual links between the spaces evoked due to the expectation contravention. First, the development of SI from a predicate denoting death to an evaluative indicator denoting extremity demonstrates a case of subjectification proposed by Traugott. Specifically, for speakers' communicative purposes to be achieved, SI is recruited from a lexical predicate denoting concrete objective meaning to construe the perspective of the speaker. Next, the motivation of such a linguistic activity is to resolve the cognitive dissonance evoked at the point of discourse. Four scenarios can be deduced with regard to the metal processes involved with the usage of SI. Reduction and addition as proposed by are argued to help reduce such a discrepancy. But four different pragmatic-discourse functions are claimed to be associated with the four scenarios.

**Key words:** subjectification, cognitive dissonance, conceptualization, expectation contravention, Hakka SI

## 1.   Introduction

   In this study, issues are addressed with regard to the morpheme SI, literally meaning 'die', in Hakka. Often replaced by other euphemisms when talking about deaths of family and friends, SI, however, is used widely in Hakka to indicate a strong evaluation of a situation of a speaker. While displaying different grammatical forms, SI carries common semantic-pragmatic properties—each sense involving the speaker's exaggerated articulation of his expectation contravention. In the next section, the phenomena as well as the issues associated with the phenomena are delineated. Section 3 briefly highlights the gist of mental space theory. Section 4 provides the account, followed by a short conclusion in section 5.

   The morpheme SI in Hakka, denoting 'die', can be used to objectively report a death situation as illustrated by the following examples in (1).

(1)  a.   Ayin      SI-tet      liong      tiao      ngiu-e.[1]
          Ayin      die-ASP   two      CL      cow
          'Ayin suffered the loss of two cows.'

     b.   Lo   nginga   hon-SI      do   giehong.
          old   man      freeze-die   on   street
          'The old man was frozen to death on the street.'

In example (1a), SI is the main predicate of the sentence, in which SI has two arguments—one being the theme and the other being the patient. While it is *two cows* that died, the possessor of the two cows, namely *Ayin*, who suffered the loss of the two cows, is seriously affected by the event. In example (1b) SI is the second predicate of the compound *hon-si*. Aside from objectively reporting a death situation as in a story telling, SI, however, is seldom used by a speaker to talk about the deaths of family or friends. While often replaced by euphemisms, SI, on the other hand, is mostly used by the speaker to exaggerate his or her subjective attitude toward a particular state of affair. In fact, when such an extended meaning is generalized, SI becomes some kind of an intensifier that is widely used to modify a predicate for intensification. Observe the following examples:

(3)  a.   SI-tung              b.   SI-hao-sit
          die-hurt                  die-love-eat
          'hurt to death'          'to eat excessively'

     c.   SI-voi-yung-qien     d.   Paise           do   voi      SI.
          die-able-spend-money       embarrassed   DO   will      die
          'being extremely extravagant'   'The embarrassment is killing the speaker.'

In the above examples, SI is rendered as an extreme intensifier that embodies the notions of absoluteness and extremity on the one hand, and that expresses hyperbolic evaluation of the state of affair on the other (cf. Bolinger 1972). As indicated by the examples, SI can modify an adjectival predicate as in (3a) to express the intensity of the state—being hurt—or a verbal predicate as in (3b) to intensify the extensibility of the action, or a verbal phrase as in (3c) and (3f) to magnify the absoluteness of the situation. Similarly, in example (3d), SI escalates the extreme extent in which the speaker feels embarrassed.

The semantic extension of SI from denoting death to denoting extremity, along with its categorical shift from a verb to a degree adverb, brings up a polysemous effect where one single form is associated with multiple meanings, and where a lexical item is recruited to designate

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[1] Pinyin Romanization system is rendered for the Hakka data. The tone marks are omitted. The following abbreviations are used for the grammatical functions: AG, agent marker; ASP, aspect markers; CL, classifier; DO, complementizer; NEG, negation marker, PART, particle.

subjective evaluative meaning. Such an observation demonstrates a perfect case of subjectification (Traugott 1989, 1995, 1999). Involving speakers' employing linguistic expressions to manifest their subjective perspective, subjectification refers to a phenomenon in which "forms and constructions that at first express primarily concrete, lexical, and objective meanings come to … serve increasingly abstract, pragmatic, interpersonal, and speaker-based functions" (Traugott 1995:32). While numerous examples from English and other languages have been provided in the past to evidence such a principle, the semantic development of SI in Hakka from objectively specifying a death situation to subjectively exaggerating the evaluation of a state of affair provides another perfect empirical illustration.

As such a process of subjectification is highly grounded in a speaker's perspective, two crucial issues arise accordingly. Specifically, what is the semantic structure of SI when it functions as an evaluative indicator? In particular, what cognitive complexity is involved in a speaker's hidden cognition when a lexical item whose objective meaning is often avoided in a discourse but whose extended meaning is widely utilized by the speaker to subjectively evaluate a state of affair. The endeavor of this study hence aims to investigate the aforementioned issues. Essentially, the semantic structure behind the usage of SI as an evaluative indicator will be constructed to elucidate the cognitive complexity involved in a speaker's conceptualization of the world. Since the manifestation of language to externalize a speaker's point of view engages complex mental operations, mental space theory as proposed by Fauconnier (1994, 1997), among others, provide a model for the meaning constructions operated in such mental act ivies. In the next section, the major points of mental space framework will hence be introduced to lay the groundwork for the explication of the semantic structure of SI.

## 2. Mental space framework

Fauconnier (1997: 1) points out that "mappings between domains are at the heart of the unique human cognitive faculty of producing, transferring, and processing meaning." As communicative activities come along, mental spaces are constructed and connected by speakers to accord with the grammar, the context and the cultural background (cf. Sweetser & Fauconnier 1996). Mental spaces are "the domains that discourse builds up to provide a cognitive substrate for reasoning and for interfacing with the world" (Fauconnier 1997: 34). Forming partial structures that proliferate themselves as discourse sets forth, mental spaces partition the discourse and the knowledge structures in a fine-grained manner. Language is the most prominent tool for human beings to manifest various aspects of human cognition. Therefore, a configuration of spaces through which they move as discourse proceeds is created by them to keep track of the discourse dynamics in order to reason and to communicate.

The assumptions behind mental space theory essentially accord with what is assumed by other work in cognitive linguistics. To begin with, mental spaces are structured by the common ground shared by the discourse participants, namely by ICMs (idealized cognitive models)

(Lakoff 1987, Fillmore 1977, 1982). Since it is claimed that the construction of spaces is highly dependent on previous constructions that are already carried out at that point in discourse, space construction is in a sense frame construction. "The frames provide the abstract-induced schemas that drive mapping across mental spaces," as maintained by Fauconnier (1994: xxxix). The mappings between spaces are hence of paramount importance to any comprehension of semantic and pragmatic linguistic interpretation since they help elucidate logically baffling phenomena such as counterfactuals, propositional attitudes, referential opacity, narrative tenses and deictics, and the like. To keep track of the complex network of spaces, the participants shift their perspectives through various strategies, which are grammatically encoded by space builders, tenses, moods, and other grammatical devices (cf. Langacker 1987, Taylor 1995).

While more indirect grammatical devices such as cultural and contextual factors can trigger mental spaces, mental spaces are mainly set up by explicit space builders. Referring to a whole range of linguistic elements that serve as triggers for setting up mental spaces, space builders include adverbials of locations and time, adverbs like *possibly* and *really*, connectives like *if...then*, and certain verbs like *believe* or *hope*. For example, in saying *John believes Mary is nice*, a space for John's beliefs is built, with minimal explicit structure corresponding to Mary's being nice. In uttering *Last semester, Mary was nice*, a space for last semester is constructed, and in uttering *John believes last semester Mary was nice*, a space for last semester is built, embedded in a belief space, which in turn is embedded in a base space. Furthermore, since the space structure incorporates frames and schematic conceptualizations, the space elements coincide with ICMs evoked by the background knowledge and are elaborated during any particular discourse.

So much for the major features of the mental space framework has been introduced. The issue in question now is how such a framework can help explicate the semantic structure of the usage of SI in Hakka. As presented earlier, SI, when functioning as an evaluative indicator, indeed exemplifies a case of space builder, which triggers various mental spaces as speakers participate in discourse. In the next section, a network of space configurations evoked by SI will be proposed to elucidate the cognitive process operated in the conceptualization of the world.

## 3.    Mental links between expectations

Before probing into the semantic structure of SI, let us examine closely the motivation behind the employment of SI as an evaluative indicator.

## 3.1  Motivation of the usage of SI

To begin with, SI, literally meaning 'die', is indeed a linguistic expression that native speakers of Hakka will avoid mentioning simply because of the cultural practices that family deaths are not only mournful but also inauspicious. While often replaced by other euphemisms

such as *gosin* or *gosi* 'pass away', SI is used instead to signify an out-of-expectation situation that is too astonishing for the speakers to accept. What is going on here in speakers' cognition can be called cognitive dissonance. According to cognitive dissonance theory developed by Festinger (1957), there is a tendency for individuals to look for consistency among their cognitions. When inconsistency occurs between attitudes or behaviors, dissonance arises. A person who has dissonant or discrepant cognitions suffers from psychological dissonance, which is experienced as unpleasant psychological exertion. Hence something must be done to eliminate the dissonance. There are three ways to remove the dissonance: reducing the significance of the dissonant beliefs, adding more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, and altering the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent (cf. Festinger 1957).

With the elucidation of cognitive dissonance in hand, it becomes clear that the recruitment of a lexical item denoting death to indicate an out-of-expectation situation demonstrates a cognitive process whereby elimination of cognitive dissonance of the speaker is operated. Specifically, for speakers' communicative purposes to be achieved, SI is recruited from a lexical predicate denoting concrete objective meaning to construe the perspective of the speaker. The meaning of death representing the very end of a life journey is then analogized into an indicator of evaluation expressing the speaker's subjective judgment of the state of affair, depicting his internally grounded assessment of the situation. While the real situation is far away from the expected norm, it is incompatible with what is believed by the speaker. Cognitive dissonance emerges after the speaker compares the perceived mental space with an expected mental space. Hence, to represent the expectation contravention and to reduce the magnitude of dissonance of what is experienced, the speaker employs a lexeme that indicates the end point of the life spectrum to place the status of the situation into a space farther away toward the end of a scale (cf. Festinger 1957; cf. also Fauconnier 1994, 1997, Sweetser & Fauconnier 1996). In other words, carrying strong evaluation of the speaker, SI is linguistically reified to express the speaker's subjective remark about the state-of-affair. The scalar nature of evaluative SI emerges clearly, operating on a scalar model of evaluation. In what follows, the cognitive and semantic structure that represents the mental activities involved in the evaluative uses of SI will be explicated.

## 3.2 The cognitive and semantic structure of SI

SI as an evaluative indicator in Hakka illustrates an overt mechanism a speaker uses to link mental space configurations of the real situations and his cognitive conceptualizations of the world. As mentioned previously, death, signifying the end point of life, is at the very end of a life spectrum. Analogically, what is denoted by SI is being located at the very end of a scale, created by the state of affair at any point of the discourse. More specifically, the information structure evoked by SI is a scalar model, whereby several mental spaces are constructed based on the shared background of discourse participants at the time of utterance. Such a scalar model

consists of a linear format, in which the interconnections between the spaces are dynamic, allowing them to be moved up or down the scale by the speaker in order to accord with what he has conceived of the reality. Since the state of affair denoted by a SI expression can be about the speaker himself or other participants, and since the state of affair can feature either positive or negative characteristics, simple calculation will bring up four different scenarios.

### 3.2.1   Scenarios about the speaker

In the first scenario, the linguistic expression of SI is used to express a positive remark about the speaker. Examples include *hao tsai SI* or *SI hao tsai* 'being unusually lucky', used to comment how exceptionally lucky the speaker is to win a lottery, to pass an exam, to avoid a misfortune, and the like. Suppose that the students have just taken a final exam. Suppose that the professor is very notorious in giving difficult questions, and often many students fail his tests. Now if the speaker finds out that he luckily passes the exam, this expression is very felicitous to say in such a frame. Consider the following utterance:

(4)  SI   hao-tsai,  ng   mo      bun gausu    dang-tet.
     Die  lucky    I    NEG     AG  professor flunk-ASP
     'I'm awfully lucky that I have not been flunked by the professor.'

Under such a frame, the speaker is commenting on unusual luckiness of the speaker himself. SI, carrying a negative connotation, is however used to describe such a situation. There seems to be an apparent semantic incompatibility between the concept of being lucky and the concept denoted by SI. What is the cognitive mechanism involved here then? Figure 1 can help elucidate the cognitive activity involved in this case.
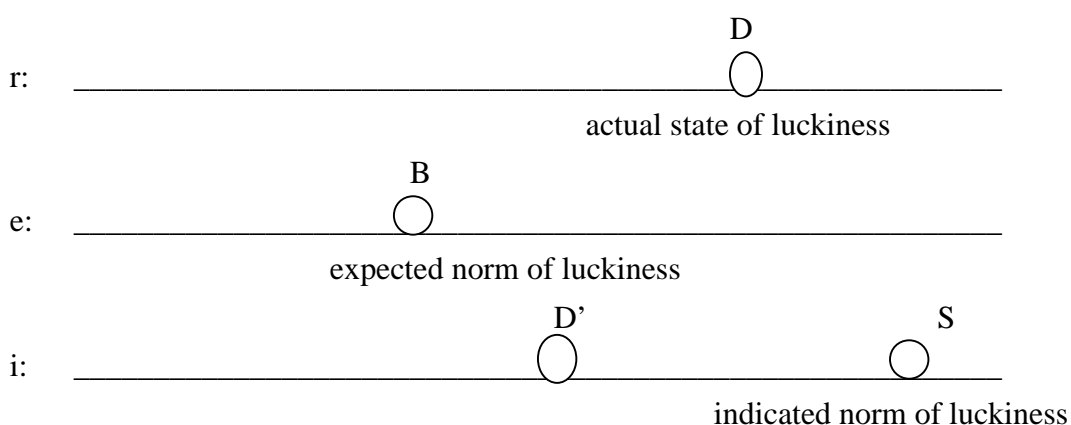


In the figure, *r* stands for the scale of luckiness, *e* stands for the scale of expected luckiness, and *i* stands for the indicated degree of luckiness. The mental space *B* represents the norm of luckiness; space *D* indicates the actual state of luckiness. Since the speaker perceives a considerable difference between *B* and *D*, inconsistency arises. The use of SI by the speaker

moves the actual degree of luckiness to space *S*, which represents an extreme state of luckiness. Since it is extraordinarily unreasonable for any person to be as lucky as indicated by space *S*, the movement of *D* to *S* amplifies the unreasonableness of the sate of affair, hence reducing the actual status of the reality of what is conceived of by the speaker, as indicated by *D'*. In other words, by remarking on the absurdity of the situation, the speaker reduces the significance of the dissonant beliefs so that the distance between the actual space and the space of expected norm is lessened, and hence maintaining his cognitions. Moreover, when the background knowledge is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that SI carries a pragmatic-discourse function of understatement in this case.

The second scenario in which a SI expression at the point of utterance is making negative remarks about the speaker himself can be illustrated by example (5):

(5)  Gi gong: ngai teu      lu-e mo      pan,      giang    gui giang    do  voi
     he said   I     whole   trip NEG    company fear      ghost fear    DO  will
     SI   ho-tsai   du-do    ng.
     die  luckily    meet     you
     He said: 'I was all by myself on the whole trip, and I was deadly/terribly afraid to bump into ghosts; luckily, I bumped into you instead.'

Taken from a ghost story, this passage is uttered by the character to express he is afraid that he might bump into a ghost on his way. Back in that time, men often have to leave their homes to other villages to work for weeks or even months to make a living. The story is about one guy whose wife is about to deliver a baby. The employer therefore notifies him to go home right after his duty in the evening. As he has to walk over the hills in the dark, he is extremely afraid because he is all by himself. This passage hence expresses his great fear after he bumps into the hearer on his way.

Now under this frame, it is natural for anybody to feel great fear if he has to walk all alone over the mountains in the dark. The prospect of the situation fills the man with dread. However, while walking over the mountain, he feels that his anxiety is much stronger than he is expected to have. Cognitive dissonance hence arises as his extreme fear is compared with the expected fear he should have. To reduce the unpleasant tension due to the dissonant beliefs of the situation, he uses the strategy of addition of the consonant beliefs by moving the expected norm up toward the end of the scale of fear. By using SI to bring the norm of fear to an upper end of the scale, the speaker hence minimizes the distance between the real space and the expected space, hence justifying his scare of the intense threat from the imaginative ghosts. His cognitive dissonance is reduced accordingly.

### 3.2.2    Scenarios about other participants

The other two scenarios are about the hearer or other participants other than the speaker himself. Two situations are involved—one bringing up positive comments whereas the other negative comments. Let's start with the scenario whereby SI is used to positively comment on the other parties other than the speaker. Consider the following example:

(6) N   SI   hao-miang     o!      song-ban      yu        ngin      zoi
    you  SI   blessed       PART    go to work    have      person    ride
    'You're being so lucky that (your husband) always drives you to your office."

This comment on the luckiness of the hearer whose husband always drives her to work is often made by my sisters or colleagues about me. Since I don't drive but my husband does, he always gives me a ride to work before he drives to work. Under such a frame, the usage of the expression *SI hao-miang* 'extremely blessed' shows an apparent semantic incompatibility because of the inherent meanings of *SI* 'die' and *hao-miang* 'blessed'. Such a reification of conceptualization demonstrates another case of resolution of cognitive dissonance, as represented by Figure 2:
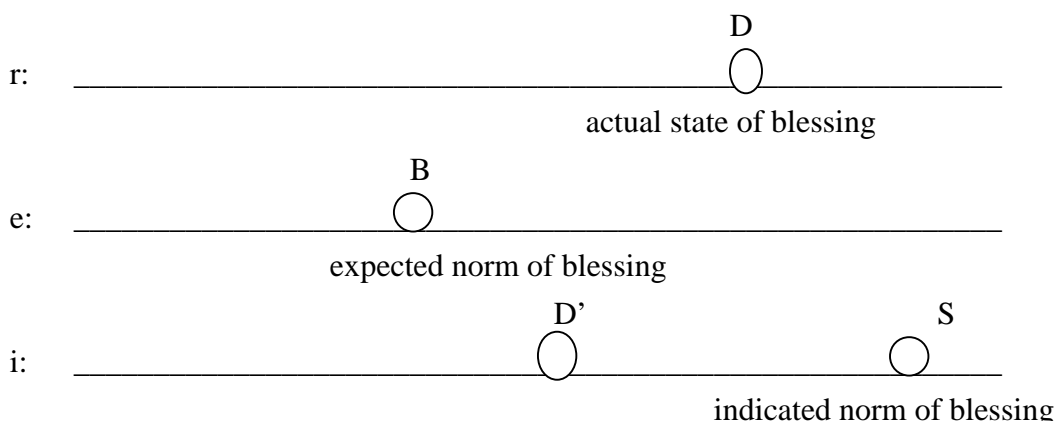


In the figure, *r* stands for the scale of blessing, *e* stands for the scale of expected degree of blessing, and *i* stands for the indicated degree of blessing. The mental space *B* represents the norm of the degree of blessing; space *D* indicates the actual state of blessing. Generally, since a speaker perceives a difference between *B* and *D*, inconsistency arises. The use of SI by the speaker moves the actual status to space *S*, which represents an extreme state of blessing. Since it is remarkably unreasonable for any person to be as blessed as indicated by space *S*, the movement of *D* to *S* enhances the unreasonableness of the sate of affair, hence reducing the actual status of the reality of what is conceived of by the speaker, as indicated by *D'*. In other words, by commenting on the unbelievability of the situation, the speaker reduces the significance of the dissonant beliefs so that the distance between the actual space and the space of expected norm is minimized, and hence balancing out his cognitions. Furthermore, when the background knowledge is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that SI carries a pragmatic-discourse function of teasing or sarcasm in this case. Since it is very lucky for me not

to worry about the transportation to work, especially when the campus is in a suburban area, a lot of colleagues, even my own sisters, really envy how lucky I am. Under such a circumstance, my colleagues or my sisters, recognizing such a cognitive dissonance, will try to reduce such a dissonance by teasing me. Reducing the significance of the actual state of affair therefore allows them to undermine my unusual luckiness, and at the same time to ease their dissonant cognitions.

The last scenario is when the speaker is making negative comments on the other participants in a discourse. Examples include *SI ngang-giang* 'being as stubborn as a mule', *SI sai mo bian* 'being such a glutton', and the like. Let's take the following example into consideration:

(7)　A-fat　　SI　sai　mo　　　bian,　　sit　do　ki　　　m　　　　zhang.[2]
　　　A-fat　　die　eat　NEG　　change　eat　DO　stand　　NEG　　straight
　　　'A-fat is such a greedy pig that he eats to the extent that he can't even stand straight.'

This expression is a derogative description of a person who is too lazy to do anything else except for eating. Example (7) is uttered by the speaker to comment on A-fat's being such a glutton, insinuating his being too lazy to do anything else except for eating. To reduce the discrepancy, he employs a linguistic expression, namely SI, to pull the expected state farther up on the scale. Such a decrease of distance puts the readjusted norm closer to the actual state of affair, justifying his judgment of A-fat's being exceptionally greedy for food. Hence, the seemingly unreasonable situation of A-fat's being so greedy for food is thereby being balanced out, hence diminishing the speaker's dissonance at the same time. Such a usage of SI delineates the pragmatic-discourse function of overstatement. Only when the norm is readjusted to a higher up position on the scale, can the cognitive dissonance be eliminated, proving the fact that A-fat is really such a glutton.

Notice that among the three methods to reduce cognitive dissonance as proposed by Festinger (1957), only two—reduction and addition—are activated in the scenarios evoked by SI. The third method—alternation of importance—is not involved. Presumably, SI invokes a scalar model that represents a one-dimensional linear format. The mental spaces hence move dynamically up and down the scale to adapt to the state of affair in question. Consequently, reduction and addition are the only two strategies employed by the speaker to resolve the cognitive dissonance.

## 4.　Concluding remarks

In sum, the four scenarios involved with the usage of SI have been explicated. The following table summarizes the findings:

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[2] The verb *sai* is a variant of *sit* in Hakka, both denoting to eat. Whereas the latter is the neutral form, the former carries strong derogatory connotation.

|  | About the speaker | | About other participants | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive remarks | Strategy | Reduction by increasing the unreasonableness of the actual state of affair e.g. *SI hao tsai* 'being extremely lucky' | Strategy | Reduction by increasing the absurdity of the actual state of affair e.g. *SI hao miang* 'being extremely blessed' |
|  | Pragmatic function | Understatement | Pragmatic function | Teasing / sarcasm |
| Negative remarks | Strategy | Addition by moving up the norm e.g. *SI giang* 'extremely afraid' | Strategy | Addition by moving up the norm e.g. *SI sai mo bian* 'being such a glutton' |
|  | Pragmatic function | Exaggeration | Pragmatic function | Overstatement |

In a nutshell, SI as an evaluative indicator elucidates a manifest mechanism a speaker uses to link mental space configurations of the real situations and his cognitive conceptualizations of the world. The involved cognitive processes are also associated with certain pragmatic-discourse functions.

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