

## **Grammaticization of the Saying Verb wa in Cantonese\***

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### **Abstract**

The concept SAY has generally been accepted as one of the most basic human activities in communication, thus being a common source notion for grammaticization across languages. Grammaticization is a kind of semantic change, giving rise to grammatical morphemes with either grammatical or pragmatic functions from lexical items in the course of time. In this study, we attempt to study the grammaticization of the saying verb wa in Cantonese, discussing how its various lexical, grammatical and discourse functions have come into being, as well as the directionality of various changes. The evolution of discourse function will be emphasized, not only because it is an unusual line of development for the saying verb, but it also involves the shift of position.

Starting as a saying verb, wa includes three kinds of development: (1) SEMANTIC CHANGE, giving rise to the cognitive meaning from the utterance meaning, (2) GRAMMATICAL CHANGE, evolving the complementizer function from the lexical verb, (3) PRAGMATIC CHANGE, developing the discourse function from the saying verb. While the first kind of change is cross-linguistically a common line of development and the second type is also evidenced in many languages, the third one is quite an unusual direction of change. As a matter of fact, together with the tonal change, the diachronic development of wa has been involved with the various aspects of grammar.

The discourse function of wa is morpho-syntactically realized as an utterance-final particle, which exclusively appears in WH-questions exclusively. Therefore, this functional change is further accompanied by the shift of position from utterance-medial to utterance-final. To account for the positional shift, it is speculated that the attribution of quotation, i.e. the agent plus the saying verb like 'you said' or 'she said', once appeared frequently in the postverbal position. When the agent is understood in context, it can thus be omitted and the saying verb itself starts to undergo grammaticization, becoming a particle in the end. This is highly plausible, because Cantonese speakers quite frequently alter the ordering of constituents. On the other hand, the particle wa can still be interpreted as the attribution in some situation. Yet, it is not the shortened form of the attribution, because it can co-occur with the particle wa within the same question, and it is ungrammatical to restore a postverbal attribution in that position. The discourse function of wa is to suggest REPETITION OF INFORMATION.

## 1. Introduction

The concept SAY has generally been accepted as one of the most basic human activities in communication, thus being a common source concept for grammaticization across languages (Saxena 1987, 1988). Grammaticization is a kind of semantic development which gives rise to the grammatical or pragmatic function from the lexical item in the course of time. The different saying verbs in Chinese languages also undergo grammaticization, yet to various degrees. The focal concern in study section is Cantonese.

The saying verb wa in Cantonese is polysemic, consisting of the cognitive meaning, the grammatical and the discourse functions. Morpho-syntactically, they are realized as lexical verb, complementizer, and particle respectively. We will discuss how these various lines of development have come into being, with special reference to the general tendencies of semantic change proposed by Traugott (1989, 1990). The evolvement of the discourse function will be emphasized, not only because it is cross-linguistically unusual, but it also involves the shift of position from utterance-medial to utterance-final.

In the following, the various synchronic meanings of the saying verb wa will first be examined in §3. Then the different kinds of change, as well as the directionality of various changes will be discussed in §4.

## 2. Corpus of data

Spontaneous conversations are important to explore the meanings of wa in present-day Cantonese, because they supply naturally occurring contexts with the speaker's actual linguistic behavior to identify the pragmatic function of this saying verb. The sources of data include: (1) TV programs about daily life (Chui 1988), (2) ten telephone conversations recorded from the public radio programs (Wong 1990).<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Polysemy of wa

This section will characterize the lexical, grammatical and discourse meanings of wa. Those idiomatic expressions consisting of wa, such as wa-si-wa 'by the way', wa-ji-nei 'whatever you say/do', ji-gam-wa 'nevertheless' and the rhetorical tag ha-wa are excluded from the discussion here.

### 3.1. Lexical meanings

#### 3.1.1. Utterance verb

As an utterance verb in its original meaning, wa can take a direct object as illustrated by (1)<sup>2</sup> or a complement. Complements function as either a direct quotation as in (2) or an indirect quotation in (3).

(1) A: jeuibai yau di yan geidak lai m geidak  
 the worst there.be some people remember come NEG remember  
 bei chin le  
 give money PRT  
 'The worst is there are some people (who) remember to come, but  
 (who) forget to pay.'

--> B: ha ngo ji nei wa bin go la  
 PRT 1.SG know 2.SG say who CL PRT  
 'I know who you (are) speaking of.' (TV)

(2) --> keui wa chao dou keui hok hang la ngo bei fan nei chao la  
 3.SG say care till 3.SG learn walk PRT 1.SG give again 2.SG care PRT  
 'He said, 'I'll take care of him till (he) learns to walk. (Then) I('ll) give him  
 back to you to take care.' (RADIO)

(3) --> danhai nei wa nei go yut nei sinsang sin mou bei  
 but 2.SG say this CL month 2.SG husband just NEG give  
 gayung nei je  
 family expense 2.SG PRT  
 'But you said (it was) just this month (that) your husband didn't give you  
 family expense'. (RADIO)

### 3.1.2. Cognitive verb

For a saying verb to evolve a cognitive meaning is a common direction of development, and having been well-studied cross-linguistically (Saxena 1987, 1988). This is further borne out in Cantonese. In (4), wa means 'to think'.

(4) --> ngo wa dou m ji hai m hai keui tao ga je  
 1.SG think all NEG know COP NEG COP 3.SG steal PRT PRT  
 'I think I don't know whether he stole (it) or not.' (TV)

### 3.2. Grammatical function--'complementizer'

The grammatical function that wa has developed into is a complementizer, which is the only one in present-day Cantonese. In spite of the fact that this line of development is also common across languages (Saxena 1987, 1988), the grammatical function of wa has not yet been generalized to all complement-taking verbs. Its distribution is highly restricted to certain utterance verbs such as gong 'to say' in (5), or mental verbs like dasyun 'to plan' in (6) and seung 'to want' in (7).

(5) --> keui jigei gong wa jeui jo ngo gaje bat nin  
 3.SG self say COMP pursue PRF 1.SG elder sister eight year  
 'He (him)self said that (he) has pursued my elder sister for eight years.' (RADIO)

(6) --> gam ne keui ne yao yao yao **dasyun wa** seung m gau la  
 so PRT 3.SG PRT PRF PRF PRF plan COMP want NEG teach PRT  
 'So, she has planned not to teach (any more).' (RADIO)

(7) --> yao m **seung wa** yingheung go jeungfu ge chintou  
 also NEG want COMP affect CL husband ASSC future  
 '(She) also does not want to affect (her) husband's future.' (RADIO)

### 3.3. Discourse Function

#### 3.3.1. Particles in Cantonese

Matisoff (1991:387) claims that 'sentence-final emotive particles are particularly richly developed in tone languages, as mere intonation is less salient when every syllable has a distinctive 'melody' of its own'. This is supported by Cantonese (cf. Cheung 1972; Gao 1984; Kwok 1984; Luke 1988; Chui 1988), as well as other Chinese languages (Li and Thompson 1981, Shie 1991 for Mandarin; Chen 1989 for Taiwanese). For instance, the Cantonese lo in (8) indicates high certainty in assertion on the part of speaker B, but gwa in (9) suggests the opposite attitude of uncertainty.

(8) A: bunyesamgang nei heui bindou a  
 in the middle of the night 2.SG go where PRT  
 'Where (are) you going in the middle of the night?'

--> B: heui daipaidong mai siuye **lo**  
 go snack booth buy bed-time snack PRT  
 'Of course, to the snack booth to buy a bed-time snack.' (TV)

(9) ngo kyutding bei do leui go hak nei fujak ngo nam  
 1.SG decide give more two CL customer 2.SG responsible 1.SG think

--> nei m hui ling ngo satmong **gwa**  
 2.SG NEG will make 1.SG disappointed PRT  
 'I('ve) decided to give you two more customers. I think you will not disappoint me.' (TV)

#### 3.3.2. Discourse function of wa--'repetition of information'

Unlike most of the Cantonese particles which mainly function to convey speaker's attitudes or states of mind at the moment of speaking, the discourse function of wa in the form of a particle in the utterance-final position is related to the flow of information between the speaker and the addressee--REPETITION OF INFORMATION. Wa appearing exclusively in WH-questions indicates that the information the speaker asks for is what he/she has missed, and the addressee is thus requested to repeat what has been mentioned in the prior context.

Consider example (10). Speaker G has made a statement, but speaker V, for whatever reason, failed to receive the message. That is why speaker V raised the question for the missing information. The particle wa lets speaker G realize the question is directly referenced to his own previous utterance. Speaker G, under the assumptions of the Cooperative Principles (Grice 1975), is supposed to provide the missing information about car parking.<sup>3</sup>

(10) G: ga che ngo mingming pak jo haidou gama  
 CL car 1.SG obviously park PRF here PRT  
 'I have obviously parked my car here'

--> V: nei gong me wa  
 2.SG say what PRT  
 'What (did) you say?' (TV)

Since V might have missed any part of G's message, he can request G to repeat just a particular portion of the message with wa, like the missing information about the car itself as in (11) or about the parking situation in (12).

(11) G: ga che ngo mingming pak jo haidou gama  
 CL car 1.SG obviously park PRF here PRT  
 'I have obviously parked my car here'

--> V: matye mingming pak jo haidou wa  
 what obviously park PRF here PRT  
 'What has obviously been parked here, as you said?'

(12) G: ga che ngo mingming pak jo haidou gama  
 CL car 1.SG obviously park PRF here PRT  
 'I have obviously parked my car here'

--> V: ga che me wa  
 CL car what PRT  
 'What (happened) to the car, as you said?'

Furthermore, wa may not be constrained by the flow of information in the immediate context. In (13) K's and V's utterances were produced on different days, according to the script of the TV program, and numerous topic shifts had already taken place as a result of the fifty-nine turn takings in between. Nevertheless, speaker V could still require K to repeat the information he/she had mentioned on the previous day.

(13) K: yiga jikhai giu nei lo <L2 BBQ L2> yatbak man jek  
 now that is ask 2.SG pay BBQ one hundred dollar PRT  
 'That is, (we're) now asking you to pay one hundred dollars for the BBQ.'

((59 turn takings))

--> V: <L2 Winnie l2> a go <L2 BBQ L2> geido chin wa  
Winnie PRT that BBQ how much money PRT  
'Winnie, how much (should I pay for) that BBQ, as you said?' (TV)

#### 4. Grammaticization of wa

Grammaticization is traditionally considered as a dynamic, unidirectional historical process whereby a lexical item becomes a grammatical morpheme and takes on a grammatical or pragmatic function. However, some recent studies like Hopper's (1979, 1982) and Herring's (1991) propose a pragmatic-based grammaticization instead. In other words, the pragmatic/interactive function is the source concept giving rise to other meanings, but not vice versa. Whether grammaticization is unidirectional or bi-directional, or whether pragmatics is the starting point or the endpoint of semantic change falls outside the domain of this study. Nevertheless, the development of wa seems to follow the traditional definition, because the verbal origin of the concept SAY, which refers to the basic human activity, should not be controversial.

Furthermore, due to the lack of historical spoken records that are particularly important to trace the development of pragmatic functions, language-internal argumentation cannot be established to reconstruct the stages of developing wa. I thus rely on cross-linguistic generalizations to discuss its various lines of development.

##### 4.1. Traugott's general tendencies in semantic change

Traugott (1989, 1990) proposes three general tendencies of semantic change, which concern how the grammatical and pragmatic functions are evolved in the process of grammaticization. They are stated as follows (1989:34-35):

- Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative / perceptual / cognitive) described situation.
- Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation.
- Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state / attitude toward the proposition.

As the directionality of change is concerned, Traugott (1989:34) further claims that Tendency I can feed Tendency II and either one can feed Tendency III. In the following, the development of wa will be discussed with respect to these general tendencies.

#### 4.2. Semantic change--from speech to cognition

Beginning as a saying verb as in (1) to (3), wa has developed a cognitive meaning such as (4). This is undoubtedly a unidirectional change in the same position with a metaphorical extension from the domain of speech to the domain of thought. The metaphor involved is SPEECH IS THOUGHT. Traugott's Tendency I is confirmed, because the internal state of cognition is developed from the external state of speech.

#### 4.3. Grammatical change--from lexical meaning to grammatical function

As exemplified by (5) to (7), the lexical meaning of wa, whether it refers to speech or thought, has undergone a grammatical change to become a complementizer, a function clearly grounded in the textual situation to indicate the structural relation among constituents. Tendency II is thus borne out.

This kind of change has significant implications to the grammar of Cantonese, giving rise to the category of complementizer. Although the original verbal meaning of wa has been lost, the textual function is acquired.

#### 4.4. Pragmatic change--from lexical meaning to discourse function

It is the quotative meaning of wa, rather than its grammatical function, which is more likely to be the source of the discourse particle wa, as indicated in (10) to (13). Both share the semantic property of SOMEBODY'S SPEECH, in that the saying verb functions to quote people's words, while the discourse particle is referenced to what the addressee has said in the previous context.

Moreover, for this discourse function to come into being is an unusual line of development. It is further accompanied by the phonological and morpho-syntactic changes. The original low-level tone of the verbal and complementizer wa has changed to the mid-rising tone of the particle function. In addition, there is also a shift of position from utterance-medial to utterance-final.

To account for the positional shift, it is speculated that the attribution of quotation, i.e. the agent plus the saying verb such as keui wa 'he said' in (2) or nei wa 'you said' in (3), once appeared frequently in the postverbal position. When the agent is understood in context, it can thus be omitted and the saying verb itself starts to undergo grammaticization, becoming a particle in the end. This is highly plausible, because Cantonese speakers quite frequently alter the ordering of constituents. For instance, in (2) and (3), it is very natural for the attributions to appear after the quoted messages, of course, with appropriate intonation or particles. The results of the word order change are indicated below:

(14) --> chao dou keui hok hang la ngo bei fan nei chao la  
care till 3.SG learn walk PRT 1.SG give again 2.SG care PRT

keui wa ke  
3.SG say PRT

'(I'll) take care of him till (he) learns to walk. (Then) I('ll) give him back to you to take care,' he said.'

- (15) danhai nei go yut nei sinsang sin mou bei gayung nei je  
but this CL month 2.SG husband just NEG give family expense 2.SG PRT

--> nei wa ke  
2.SG say PRT

'But (it was) just this month (that) your husband didn't give you family expense, (as) you said.'

Another piece of evidence is that the particle wa in WH-questions can still be interpreted as the attribution in those situations like (11), (12) and (13). Yet, it is not the shortened form of the attribution, because the attribution can co-occur with the particle wa within the same question, as evidenced by (10). Besides, it is ungrammatical to restore a postverbal attribution in the questions, as illustrated by (16) and (17). In short, the particle wa is likely to be evolved from the attribution of quotation, since the meaning has not yet been completely lost. However, its main function in present-day Cantonese is to indicate REPETITION OF INFORMATION, under the circumstances that the speaker has missed some information and requests the addressee to repeat.

- \*(16) --> V: matye mingming pak jo haidou nei wa  
what obviously park PRF here 3.SG PRT  
'What has obviously been parked here, as you said?'

- \*(17) --> V: <L2 Winnie l2> a go <L2 BBQ L2> geido chin  
Winnie PRT that BBQ how much money

nei wa  
3.SG PRT

'Winnie, how much (should I pay for) that BBQ, as you said?'

Without involving speaker's subjective attitude, the development of the particle wa also conforms to Traugott's Tendency II, because this discourse function grounded in the metalinguistic situation of actual communication is developed from the external state of speech. Although the evolved grammatical and discourse functions of wa can be subsumed under Tendency II, it seems more appropriate to treat them as separate directions of change in Cantonese. The complementizer wa is a function of grammar, whose source meaning is the lexical verb, whether it refers to utterance or cognitive interpretation. The particle wa, on the other hand, is a function grounded in the world of discourse, whose source meaning is particularly the quotation of speech.

## 5. Conclusions



Together with the tonal change manifested by the particle wa, the grammaticization of this saying verb has been involved with the different domains of grammar, as indicated in the following:

- (a) Semantic change--the utterance meaning takes on a cognitive meaning.
- (b) Grammatical change--the complementizer function has evolved.
- (c) Pragmatic change--the discourse function comes into being.

Figure 1. indicates the schematic representation of these three changes taking part in the grammaticization of wa, and their relations to Traugott's tendencies of change.

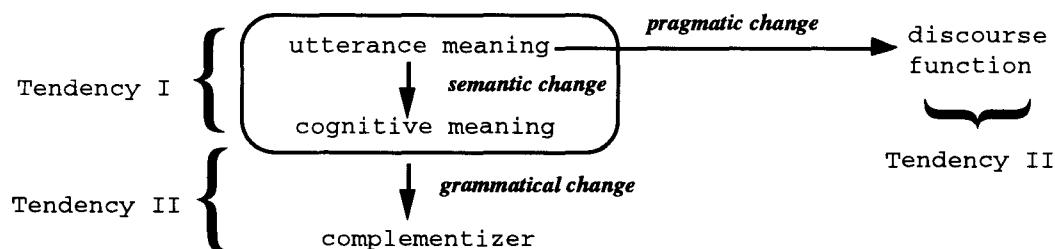


Figure 1. Grammaticization of *wa*

According to the definitions of the various tendencies in §4.1, only Tendency I and II are evidenced in the Cantonese case, because speaker's subjective attitude toward the propositions is not part of the meaning of wa. However, Tendency III is evidenced in the grammaticization of another saying verb kong in Taiwanese,<sup>4</sup> another major Chinese language.

In Taiwanese, besides evolving the cognitive meaning and the complementizer function from the utterance meaning, kong can also be realized as an utterance-final particle, appearing in declaratives and imperatives, rather than in questions (Chen 1989). Its function is to represent such kind of subjective attitude on the part of the speaker that what he/she mentions in an assertion or command is supposed to be obvious to the addressee. The following is an example of the particle kong:<sup>5</sup>

- (18) A: I jít jí kong kah chin hó !  
 he Japanese speak very well  
 'He speaks Japanese very well.'
- > B: I tùi jit pún lâi ê kong !  
 he from Japan come EA  
 'Of course, he comes from Japan!'

The different discourse functions of wa and kong seem to suggest that their respective socio-cultural environments play a crucial role in developing a particular function to fulfill their own communicative needs. It is hoped that the present study can motivate future research on how the socio-cultural environment shapes the grammar of Cantonese in a way distinct from other Chinese languages.

## Notes

\* I wish to thank Tsuyoshi Ono for his valuable discussion on this work. I also thank Ken Field for editing the paper.

<sup>1</sup> Examples from the TV programs are labeled as 'TV'; examples from the telephone conversations are labeled as 'RADIO'. Examples without labeling source at the end are constructed data.

<sup>2</sup> Relevant items in examples are in bold; the lines where the items appear are marked by the arrow sign '-->'.  
-->

Grammatical abbreviations used in the present paper include:

1.SG	first person singular
2.SG	second person singular
3.SG	third person singular
ASSC	associative marker
CL	classifier
COMP	complementizer
COP	copular
EA	epistemic-attitudinal particles
NEG	negative marker
PRF	perfective marker
PRT	particle
SA	speech-act particle

<sup>3</sup> The particle function of wa can be replaced and fulfilled by the use of rising intonation at the end of questions.

<sup>4</sup> Taiwanese is the Southern Min dialect spoken in Taiwan.

<sup>5</sup> Example (18) is example (72) in Chen's M.A. thesis. The transcription, glosses and literal translation follow the original.

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