

A Mirative Conditional Developing in Nanning Mandarin: A Case Study of a New-born Language

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The article discusses the grammaticalization process of the post-verb adverb “xian” (先) in Nanning Mandarin (a newly developing variety), and the path is from a temporal adverb to a sentence-final particle expressing conditionals. “Xian” has two functions in Nanning Mandarin: it can serve as a temporal adverb (as in (1)), and as a sentence-final particle marking a conditional clause (as in (2)):

(1) “Xian” as an adverb

Speaker 1: “Mingtian jiao ta yiqi qu wan.” Speaker 2: “Ta yao guang shangchang xian.”

Speaker 1: “Call him to hang out tomorrow.” Speaker 2: “He is going to the market first.”

(2) “Xian” as a sentence-final particle

Speaker 1: “Mingtian jiao ta yiqi qu wan.” Speaker 2: “Mingtian bu xiayu xian.”

Speaker 1: “Call him to hang out tomorrow.” Speaker 2: “Only if it doesn’t rain tomorrow, then you may make it. (Please note that tomorrow it may rain.)”

What’s more, the conditional clause has two semantic components, one the necessary conditional element (“Only if” in (2)), the other the mirative element (“Please note that” in (2)). Thus, we argue that “xian” expresses a mirative condition.

The conditional interpretation is limited by certain circumstances, which are (a) the contexts of interaction, including dialogues and afterthoughts; (b) the contexts whose presupposition is that the protasis is a necessary condition of the apodosis, and whose assertion is that the protasis may be FALSE in real world. The current research suggests that the conditional reading is the result of grammaticalization of “xian”, from a temporal adverb to a conditional marker, which is also an established typological path of grammaticalization. This paper offers comparative evidence supporting its grammaticalization. The corresponding phenomenon shows that many of the other southern dialects of Chinese have a temporal adverb without conditional meaning, while none of them applies a conditional marker without the temporal meaning. Although “xian” is still in the early stage of grammaticalization, we may predict that in the advanced stage, “xian” can code a grammatical category of mirative conditionals – a subset of conditionals. In addition, it is also a case study of the emergence of a new Mandarin variety.

Keywords: xian, grammaticalization, the post-verb adverb, conditional, mirative

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