Synonyms are not the same –
A corpus-based study of Mandarin-Chinese Prepositions

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Synonyms tend to have the same meanings. For example, both zài jia lǐ and zài jia zhōng mean “in a house.” in Mandarin. However, do words have the same meanings, such as zài …lǐ and zài …zhōng in Mandarin circumfixes, behave differently? In this talk I try to answer two questions related to this issue. One concerns differences between literal and metaphorical meanings in synonyms. A second question is why synonyms such as lǐ and zhōng are grammaticalized in different ways.

This research focuses on two Mandarin prepositions in fixed frames: [zài ‘at’ … lǐ ‘inside’] and [zài ‘at’ … zhōng ‘middle’]. Both realize the meaning in in Mandarin Chinese. Chung et. al. (2012) have used the Chinese Gigaword Corpus 2.0 to provide evidence that people use lǐ and zhōng in different ways. This research goes a step further by using Academic Sinica Balanced Corpus 4.0 to make a cross-corpus comparison. In the data set (1000 for zài …lǐ 1000 for zài …zhōng), 78.7% of occurrences of the construction [zài ‘at’… lǐ ‘inside’] is used in its literal meaning like container or location. In contrast, 65% of the instances of the construction [zài ‘at’… zhōng ‘middle’] is used in its metaphorical meaning like knowledge or text. From these data, a complementary relationship exists between [zài ‘at’… lǐ ‘inside’] and [zài ‘at’… zhōng ‘middle’].

In order to provide further evidences for differences between [zài ‘at’… lǐ ‘inside’] and [zài ‘at’… zhōng ‘middle’], the researcher uses collostructural analysis in R package to investigate the distribution of nouns for these two circumfixes. Concrete nouns like zuǐ (mouth) and fāng (house) have preference for zài …lǐ , but zài …zhōng is preferred to state abstract nouns, such as shēng mìng (life) and hēi àn (darkness). In conclusion, this study not only suggests people tend to use Chinese synonymous clusters in different ways but contributes to further methodology for analysis of synonymous words.

References