On the subjectivity of Mandarin causal connectives:
Robust profiles or genre-sensitivity?

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Recent corpus-based studies have shown that differences in 'subjectivity' − the degree to which the speaker expresses himself in an utterance − can account for the usage of causal connectives such as *because* and *so* in major European languages (Dancygier 2009; Evers-Vermeul, Degand, Fagard & Mortier 2011; Keller 1995). For instance, Dutch forward causal connectives can be categorized as 'objective connectives' (e.g. *daardoor* 'as a result'), 'moderate connectives' (e.g. *daarom* 'that's why'), and 'subjective connectives' (e.g. *dus* 'so'). Subjective connectives usually express epistemic causal relations between arguments and claims like *The lights are out, so the neighbors are not at home,* whereas objective connectives are used to indicate cause-consequence relations that exist between states or events in the outside world, like *John fell into the river. As a result, he was wet all over.* The notion of subjectivity is presented as the cognitive mechanism underlying the use of causal connectives (see Sanders & Sweetser 2009). If the notion of subjectivity is indeed a basic cognitive principle, it ought to play a role in the description of connectives in other languages as well.

In a corpus-based analysis we investigated the subjectivity profiles of eight Mandarin causal connectives in three genres: argumentative, informative and narrative texts. Among these eight Mandarin connectives, there are three 'reason connectives' that are translated into the English *because* or *since* (i.e. *jìrán*, *yīnwèi*, and *yóuyú*), and five 'result connectives' that are translated into the English *so* or *therefore* (i.e. *kějiàn*, *suǒyǐ*, *yīncǐ*, *yīn'ér*, and *yúshì*). In order to give a precise characterization of these connectives, we adopted an integrative approach to the issue of subjectivity. Therefore, we used four subjectivity indicators: modality, domain (following Sweetser 1990), and the presence and identity of a 'Subject of Consciousness' − the person responsible for constructing the causal relation (Pander Maat & Sanders 2001).

Our results show that six Mandarin causal connectives display subjectivity profiles that differ from each other, but that are robust across genres. That is, they are either (more or less) objectively or subjectively oriented, and their orientations do not vary with text type. Accordingly, we suppose that subjectivity, as a semantic feature, can be fully specified in the lexicon, and can thus result in a subjectivity profile that is constant across genres. Results show that the subjectivity meanings of two other, relatively frequent connectives, *suǒyǐ* and *yīncǐ* are genre sensitive. They become less subjective in narrative texts. Hence, we suggest that the subjectivity feature can be semantically underspecified, and consequently a connective's degree of subjectivity can be partially determined by the pragmatics of the context. In sum, our results hint at the universality of subjectivity as a cross-linguistic cognitive principle in categorizing causal connectives.

References

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