

Conceptualizing Constructions of Space Particle *Xià* in Mandarin Chinese: A Corpus Based Study

Ansley Chi-Lin Hung¹, Alvin Cheng-Hsien Chen², Jen-i Li³

¹Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University, ansleyh125@gmail.com

² Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University alvinchen@ntnu.edu.tw

³ Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University, lijeni@ntnu.edu.tw

The postposition *xià* in Mandarin represents the meaning of ‘under.’ In daily discourse, speakers use *xià* with either an optional possessive marker *zhī* (e.g., *hé zuò ZHǐ XIÀ* ‘under cooperation’) or an optional co-verb *zài* ‘at’ (e.g., *ZÀi yuè guāng XIÀ* ‘under the moon light’). Sometimes, speakers can use all three together to denote the spatial relation of ‘being under’ (e.g., *ZÀi zhǎng kòng ZHǐ XIÀ* ‘under control’). These alternative constructions may seem synonymous because *zài* is a preposition that marks a static locational connection with neither overt inflection nor particular spatial semantics (Cai, 2013), and *zhī* merely denotes a generic possessive/associative reading. Since true synonyms are rare (Saeed, 2011: ch3), this study aims to investigate the underlying distinctive semantic features of these near-synonymous variants of space particle constructions (SPCs) associated with *xià* in Taiwanese Mandarin: [...*xià*], [...*zhīxià*], [*zài*...*xià*], and [*zài*...*zhīxià*]. Our data were obtained from the latest version of the Corpus of Contemporary Taiwanese Mandarin (COCT), which is by far the largest representative Mandarin corpora in Taiwan. Around 360,000 concordance lines in the written corpus (the maximal number a user can access) of the four *xià*-related constructions were retrieved through the standard query search engine provided by the corpus provider, National Academy for Education Research. We adopted a collocation analysis approach (Stefanowitsch and Gries, 2003), namely, multiple distinctive collexeme analysis (Gries and Stefanowitsch, 2004), to determine the most distinctive landmark (LM) head nouns associated with each type of spatial construction. A chi-square test was then employed as a post-hoc analysis to examine the relationship between the SPC alternative and semantic features of the head nouns.

Our analysis yields the following findings. First, each construction has its strong preference for the co-occurring LMs. [*Xià*] favors neutral nominal entities (e.g., *jiǎo XIÀ* ‘under foot’); [...*zhīxià*] tends to cooccur with abstract lexemes, most of which are statives such as emotions and feelings; [*zài*...*xià*] often cooccurs with positive nouns (e.g., *ZÀi zhī chí XIÀ* ‘under the support

of”) ; [zài_zhīxià] prefers negative abstract concepts that are either static or dynamic (e.g., ZÀI bào lì ZHĪ XIÀ ‘under violence’; ZÀI bī pò ZHĪ XIÀ ‘under duress’). This result is inconsistent with Cai’s (2013) observation that zài is more abstract in terms of meaning. Instead, our findings suggest that one of the zài constructions, [zài_zhīxià], attracts concrete lexemes. In addition, zhī constructions attract static content and zài elicits semantic prosody. It is concluded that different constructions of one space particle are not as synonymous as previous studies assumed and elicit specific connotations. This study shows great promise for pondering the function of adpositions as well as circumpositions that are semantically synonymous in both Mandarin and other languages.

keywords: space particles, quantitative corpus linguistics, adposition, near-synonym, collostructional analysis, cognitive semantics

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