

DEFINITENESS VS INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN TEOCHEW, SOUTHERN MIN.

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Background

The current research was inspired by our previous findings on plurality markers in dialects of Chinese. Some of those, although lacking a fully developed category of plurality, still have ‘optional’ markers [1] indicating ‘more than one entity’, notably the suffix -men 仨 in Standard Mandarin, which has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention (see [2], [3], [4] among others), as well as xie 些 in Chengdu [5], or hue 伙 in Teochew [6] and Hainanese [7]. The constraints on their usage belong to the domain of pragmatics and not grammar. Thus, exploring constraints on compatibility of such markers provides us with additional information on the internal structure of pragmatic categories in these languages. Based on the findings regarding the plurality marker in Teochew, our work addresses the interplay of definiteness and topicality in this dialect.

Analysis

According to our data, NPs that take the suffix -hue are mostly definite. (See [8] for discussion on definiteness in Chinese). Another observation that we have made is that NP-hue are most preferred in preverbal (i.e. subject) position. Out of 94 examples using -hue (collected from television broadcast), 54 N-hue groups take subject position [9]. This made us put forward a hypothesis that it is not only definiteness but also topic position that licenses using -hue.

It is clear enough that a (referential) noun group in topic position is more likely to be understood as definite. In order to independently explore the impact of the two categories (i.e. definiteness and topicality) on using -hue, we need to look up for cases where they do not coincide. It can either be sentences with a non-topical definite group, or sentences with an indefinite group in the topic.

It turns out that, regardless of whether the plural suffix is used, either option is hardly grammatical in Teochew. Consider the following:

1. An indefinite NP cannot occur in the preverbal subject position unless accompanied by a verb of existence “u”. Technically, the sentence is then transformed into a polyclausal construction where the NP comes in postposition of “u”. See examples 1a and 1b:

(1a)

* — 撮 学生 已经 通过 了 考试。

tsek tshoh hakseng innkeng thongkue liou khautshi
one tshoh student already pass- PFV exam

(Intended: ‘Some students passed the exam already.’)

(1b)

有 — 撮 学生 已经 通过 了 考试。

u tsek tshoh hakseng innkeng thongkue liou khautshi
be one CL student already pass- PFV exam

‘Some students passed the exam already. [Lit: There are some students who have already passed the exam]’

2. In turn, definite NPs cannot occur in postverbal subject position. There is a limited number of verbs that allow a postverbal subject, but the NP in this position is read as indefinite. The sentence 2a is thus infelicitous, as it contains a possessor “my”, and it only becomes grammatical when “my” is changed to a quantifier “many” and thus the NP is no longer identifiable as unique.

(2a)

*昨日 开 家长会, 来了 我个 家长。
 tsazit khui ketsianghue lai liou ua kai ketsiang
 yesterday take.place parent-teacher meeting come-PFV I-ATTR parent
 (Intended: ‘There was a parent-teacher meeting yesterday, and there came my parents’).

(2b)

昨日 开 家长会, 来了 很多 家长。
 tsazit khui ketsianghue lai liou hohtsoi ketsiang
 yesterday take.place parent-teacher meeting come-PFV many parent
 ‘There was a parent-teacher meeting yesterday, (and there) came many parents.’

Thus, our original intention to observe the impact of the information structure on availability of -hue has failed due to the fact that we were not able to get contexts where topic/focus distinction can be clearly distinguished from definiteness/indefiniteness distinction.

Conclusion and discussion

Based on the observed findings, we suggest that the two categories, namely definiteness/indefiniteness of the NP and its position in the information structure, are not mutually independent in Teochew. Rather, theme position is bound to definite groups only, and the syntactic structure of the whole sentence is transformed in case this requirement is violated. It is challenging to further extend the research and see if the same holds true for some other dialects of Chinese. The reason why the abundant works regarding the Mandarin suffix -men have focused on definiteness, while leaving information structure out of scope, may well be that they are equally mutually dependent in Mandarin.

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