Labile Verbs in Classical and Middle Chinese

This paper focuses on the diachronic changes in the system of labile verbs during the documented history of Chinese, focusing on the stages of Classical Chinese (c. 8th-5th century BC) and Middle Chinese (language of the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties, i.e. in the 6th-10th centuries AD) as compared to the situation attested in Modern Chinese.

Concentrating, foremost, on the causative type of lability (also referred to as causative lability), we will discuss several drastic changes in the class of labile verbs observed during and immediately after these periods. We argue that labile verbs in the earlier period of the development of Chinese can be classified into two major groups in terms of the source of lability: (i) basic labile verbs which constitute the core of this class and attest the labile syntax from the earliest documented texts onwards; and (ii) derived labile verbs which become labile as a consequence of diachronic syntactic processes, such as the causative transition and the putative transition.

The causative transition of verbs, known as *Shidong Yongfa* (使動用法, "cause-do usage") in Chinese grammatical tradition, can convert an intransitive verb or even a noun into a transitive verb. For example, the verb *wo* 'lie' is most often used intransitively (cf. 1a), but in rare cases it can be transitivized by adding a direct object (cf. 1b), which induces a causative meaning 'cause [smb.] to lie'; accordingly, *wo* becomes a labile verb.

(1) a.

臥	赤子	天下	之	上	而	安。
wo	chi-zi	tian-xia	zhi	shang	er	an.
Lie	infant	world	GEN	top	CONJ	peaceful

'(Make) an infant (emperor) lie on the top of the world and then (the world becomes) peaceful.'   *Zhi-an Ce* 治安策 (Li and Thompson 1994:232)

b.

夫子	臥	而	不	聽，……
fu-zi	**wo**	er	bu	ting, ……
master	lie	CONJ	NEG	Listen

'The master lies (on the bed) but does not listen (to me)…'
Mencius, Gongsun Chou Xia 孟子公孫醜下

Similarly, the putative transition of verbs (*Yidong Yongfa* 意動用法, "consider-do usage" in Chinese tradition) can convert a stative verb, or even a noun into a transitive verb by assigning it a putative meaning and thus making it labile. This is the case, for instance, with the stative verb *xiao* 'be small', which is normally intransitive, but becomes transitive with an object (*tian-xia* 'world' in (2), with the putative meaning 'consider [smth.] to be small', cf.

(2)

登	太山	而	小	天下。
deng	tai-shan	er	**xiao**	tian-xia.
ascend	Mount Tai	CONJ	be small	World

'(Confucius) ascended the Mount Tai and he considered the world to be small (the world appeared to him small).'   *Mencius* 孟子 (Bisang 2013:280)

We argue that these two syntactic processes were quite common in Classical and Middle Chinese, but do not operate in later periods of the development of Chines, which accounts for the decline of the labile type in Modern Chinese.

References

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