A constructional investigation into the loss of the adverse avertive in Mandarin Chinese

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This paper considers loss quantitatively and qualitatively from the perspective of constructionalisation (Traugott & Trousdale 2013), using the adverse avertive construction in Chinese as a case study.

The construction is characterised formally by an expletive negator, and functionally by four features: imminence, pastness, counterfactuality (Kuteva 2001) and adversity (Heine & Miyashita 2008). It is formalised as: [[ADV EXP.NEG VP] <-> [almost did VP (VP = adverse), but did not]]. Neither the form nor the whole bundle of functional features has been preserved synchronically. The expletive negator *mei* has fused with the adverb *chayidian* and no adversity is inherent in *chayidianmei*.

The loss of the construction can be accounted for by (1) quantitatively, decreases in type and token frequencies, and (2) qualitatively, the change in the most frequent, thus prototypical, member of the construction. Following Goldberg (2006), the most frequent member of a construction supplies the construction with its constructional meaning (e.g. *give* in the case of the ditransitive). The adverse avertive 'constructional meaning supplier' at first was *wei*, and then *xian*, both lit. 'danger; to threaten', which established and maintained the adversity meaning through their links to 'danger'. After *chayidian*, lit. 'differ (by) a little' became more frequent than *xian* and replaced it as the constructional meaning supplier, the link between 'danger' and the adverse avertive became opaque, thus prompting the loss of adversity and disrupting the crosslinguistic association between adversity and expletive negation (Ziegeler 2016).

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