Semantics of Modal Verbs in Chinese: A Dialectal Perspective

Szu-I Sylvia Yu
Graduate Institute of Linguistics
National Tsing Hua University

Abstract

The dissertation studies the Semantics of modal verbs in three Chinese dialects: Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese Southern Min and Fuzhounese. Traditionally, it is said that there are two categories for modality: deontics and epistemics. However, since capability means quite differently from the other two categories, capability should be separated from deontics or epistemic, so that the semantic function of each modal verb would clearer.

In this dissertation, three deontic meanings are investigated: obligation, permission and volition. Deontics indicates an agent exercising authority; that is, speakers’ permission of or insistence on events and also the responsibility of speakers or subjects. In epistemics, two meanings are discussed: inference and value. Both of them express the possibility or necessity of the occurrence of events. Moreover, capability is concerned with abilities of speakers or subjects.

Mostly, modal verbs play roles in more than one category, and have different contextual meanings. The relationship between forms and meanings is not always one-to-one associated. In order to probe contextual meanings of each modal verb, and the relationship among forms and meanings (one-to-many), the study goes with the basis of authentic linguistic data of three dialects. The symmetrical phenomena between modal positive forms and their negative counterparts are also discussed. Both positive and negative forms are equally stressed.

On account of discussing modality in language, not only the pre-verbal modal words are worth a visit, but also some post-verbal modal words deserve to be mentioned. This is also an untouched part in former study. Similarly, the symmetrical phenomenon between positive and negative counterpart are also included.

The latter part of the dissertation deals with the post-verbal de (得) in Mandarin Chinese. Via different de-constructions, modal meanings are rendered. Among
several *de*-constructions, modal-*de* is found in, such as \([\text{Verb} + \text{de} + \text{directional complement}]\), \([\text{Verb} + \text{de} + \text{Verb}]\) and \([\text{Verb} + \text{de}]\).

To comply with the post-verbal modality issue in Mandarin Chinese, related issues in Chinese Min dialects, Taiwanese Southern Min and Fuzhounese, are associated, too. There are also special modal constructions in Taiwanese Southern Min and Fuzhounese. They are *tit*-construction in Taiwanese Southern Min and *li*-construction in Fuzhounese. These modal constructions show distinct morphological meanings from Mandarin Chinese. The verb \(e^7/e^{53}\) (會, can) and \(tit^8/li^{24}\) are served as circumfix of verbs, and the output construction \([e^7/e^{53} + \text{Verb} + tit^8/li^{24}]\) indicates potentiality (possibility). In addition, after undergoing Lexicalization, \([e^7/e^{53} + \text{Verb} + tit^8/li^{24}]\) turns to be an integral, and it can be followed by other predicates. The constructional meaning is interpreted as either permission or potentiality. The combination of verb \(e^7/e^{53}\) (會, can) and \(tit^8/li^{24}\) can also be a complement marker, which tails after the main verb and directs to complements.

Though dialects are from the same language, other than lexical and pronunciation differences, in other areas they also show discrepancies. It seems that Taiwanese Southern Min and Fuzhounese face different directions from Mandarin Chinese in evolution of similar language constructions. *De* in some Mandarin Chinese constructions totes modal meanings. However, there is no real post-verbal modal word in the other two dialects. In order to show modal meanings, to attach the verb \(e^7/e^{53}\) (會, can) or its negative counterpart \(be^7/me^{53}\) (袂, cannot) in front of the main predicate and to attach \(tit^8/li^{24}\) after the main predicate are a must in Taiwanese Southern Min and Fuzhounese. Even if the combination becomes a lexicalized auxiliary, the main predicate is still tailed.

Both deontics and epistemics can express modal meanings: possibility or necessity. Negatives are markers with unique functions semantically and grammatically. In some cases, the positive-negative switch of modal words can also switch the reading in between possibility and necessity. Moreover, language armed with contexts and speakers’ attitudes and emotions is different from Logic. Therefore, interpretations of Linguistic negation are more complicated, and mostly show extra pragmatic meanings.