

Study on Chinese Functional Morphemes “*Ne*” and “*Men*”: Affixes or Clitics?

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Abstract: Based on the criteria proposed by Zwicky and Pullum (1983), this paper conducts a comparative study of two functional morphemes in Chinese, namely “*ne*” (呢) and “*men*” (们), to determine whether they function as clitics or affixes. This question does not have a straightforward answer, as Chinese is a non-inflectional language distinct from the Indo-European languages that most studies discuss. The results show that “*ne*” is more inclined to be a clitic while “*men*” is more affix-like. Though both of them cannot stand alone and both are unstressed functional words, their behaviour differs to some extent.

Keywords: Functional morphemes; “*Ne*”; “*Men*”; Clitics; Affixes

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1. Introduction

In most languages, we encounter “little words” that resemble full words but cannot stand on their own. Instead, they must “lean on” a neighboring word, akin to *the’d*, *’ve* and unstressed *’em* of *Kim’d’ve helped’em* (‘Kim would have helped them’). These are known as clitics and are found across most of the world’s languages (Spence, 1991). To date, most research on clitics has focused on Indo-European languages such as English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. There is a paucity of research on clitics in Chinese, a non-inflectional language distinct from the aforementioned inflectional languages.

The earliest reliable records of Chinese date back more than 3000 years ago in the form of oracle bone script. For Chinese, a parataxis and pictographic language, whose orthographical forms are characters, it might be even more difficult to distinguish an element as a clitic or not. Zwicky (1985) considered that ‘typological and theoretical speculations about clitics require that the CLITIC be adequately distinguished from the INFLECTIONAL AFFIX on the one hand and from the INDEPENDENT WORD on the other.’ The current paper draw a comparative study on two functional morphemes in Chinese, i.e. 呢 *ne* and 们 *men*, examining whether they are clitics or affixes —— a question without straightforward answer and therefore worthy of discussion.

In English, clitic forms typically appear in the same sentence position as their full-word counterparts. However, in many languages, clitics adhere to distinct placement rules (Spencer, 1991). Chinese can be a case in point. As one of the earliest reliable records of scripts dating back over 3000 years, Chinese is unique due to its paratactic and pictographic nature, with characters serving as its orthographic forms. This complexity might make it particularly challenging to distinguish whether an element functions as a clitic or not. Zwicky (1985) argued that typological and theoretical considerations necessitate clearly differentiating clitics from inflectional affixes on one hand and

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independent words on the other. This paper conducts a comparative study of two functional morphemes in Chinese, namely 'ne' and 'men', to determine whether they function as clitics or affixes—a question without a straightforward answer and thus deserving of discussion.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of clitics remains a subject of considerable debate within the field of transformational grammar. Aspects such as the reduced form of pronunciation, the morphological status, and syntactic transformation have garnered attention from linguists with diverse perspectives. However, there is still divergence on a clear definition of what constitutes a clitic.

In *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*, Crystal (2003) defines Clitic (-ize, -ization) as a term used in grammar to refer to a form that resembles a word but cannot stand on its own as a normal utterance, being structurally dependent upon a neighboring word in a construction. Frawley (2003) explains in *Oxford International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* that clitic is "a term conventionally applied as a generalization of the traditional categories proclitic and enclitic...". This single category conceals two distinct linguistic research traditions: proclitic as accent-less words (or particles) which depend accentually on an adjacent accented word, and form a prosodic unit together while enclitic related to observation that some elements in some languages appear in positions where the normal syntax of the corresponding syntactic category cannot fit in with.

Spence (1991) interprets that clitics are typically function words, such as modal participles, conjunctions, pronominals, or auxiliary verbs. Historically, they generally develop from fully fledged words and frequently evolve into inflectional affixes. Spence concludes that cliticization is freer and less restricted lexically than affixation, in the sense that clitics will typically attach themselves to any word provided it is in the right position in the sentence, while affixes usually only attach to specific classes of words or stems. Zwicky (1977) classified clitics into two categories: simple clitics and special clitics. The former is defined as optional variants of full forms and occurs in the same positions in sentences as the corresponding full forms. According to Zwicky, the ability to occur with the appropriate full form in syntactic structures can be a major condition for a clitic.

Dixon (2007) embarks on the phonological features and scrutinizes sixty grammatical elements which have alternative forms with full phonological forms and corresponding reduced forms. He notices that clitics are best regarded as reductions from corresponding stressed free forms, as they generally have the same positioning as the corresponding free form. He further argues that clitics always occur on the periphery of a word, with proclitics before prefixes and enclitics after suffixes. He supposes that each of these grammatical elements in English can function either as a free form with an independent phonological word or as a clitic that bears no stress and makes up a phonological word with a host item (that bears stress) preceding or following it. He also explained the grammatical behavior of phrasal verbs in view of the behavior of clitic pronouns.

We can come to some converged features of a clitic from the above definitions.

First, a clitic is a phonologically reduced element. Second, a clitic resembles a word, but is not a word. It cannot stand on its own, but instead attaches to a host adjacent to it. Further, a clitic is typically a functional word.

Until now, the bulk of clitic research has centered around inflectional languages like English and French. Although there have been studies on Chinese clitics, they have predominantly concentrated on their syntactic behaviors. For example, Chiu (1995) argues that the clausal structure of Mandarin Chinese contains an object clitic projection (SuoP). This discussion is based on the syntactic behavior of the particle suo, which occurs when there is syntactic movement of an accusative NP. Ting (2010) investigates the comparable climbing phenomenon of suo in Chinese and derives an empirical generalization that there exists a true case of clitic climbing. This means that a clitic appears not in a position associated with the verb by which it is selected but indeed in a higher clause position.

There exists ongoing debate regarding the classification of the Chinese negation marker *bu* ('not') as a clitic-like element. Huang (1988) and Ernst (1995) advocate for the clitic status of *bu*, attributing its incompatibility with the perfect aspectual marker *-le* and manner phrases in the *V-de* construction to this categorization. Conversely, Po-Lun & Pan (2001) contend that *bu* does not exhibit clitic-like properties but rather functions as a focus-sensitive operator.

To sum up, the limited body of research on clitics in Chinese indicates that this field is still emerging, necessitating innovative and thorough explorations on the subject.

3. Theoretical Framework

Zwicky and Pullum (1983) developed a set of criteria for cliticness and affixhood to answer the specific question whether the *-n't* formative in English is a clitic or an affix. They concluded six distinctive criteria for distinguishing clitics from affixes, which are listed as below:

Host selectivity: Clitics can exhibit a low degree of selection with respect to their hosts while affixes exhibit a high degree of selection with respect to their stems.

Arbitrary gaps in the set of combinations are more characteristic of affixed words than of clitic groups.

Morphophonological idiosyncrasies are more characteristic of affixed words than of clitic groups.

Semantic idiosyncrasies are more characteristic of affixed words than of clitic groups.

Lexical integrity: Syntactic rules can affect affixed words, but cannot affect clitic groups.

Clitic-affix ordering: Clitics can attach to material already containing clitics, but affixes cannot.

The following discussions will be conducted based on these criteria, among which the most important feature to justify a clitic is the unselectivity of hosts. For example, The possessive 's in present-day English is considered by some scholars (Zwicky (1987), Lapointe (1990), Miller (1991), Payne (2009)) to be a possessive or genitive affix while others (Quirk et al. (1985), Anderson (2008)) maintain that it is a possessive clitic because it is completely unselective to the preceding word as is shown in example 1).

Example 1) a) the man's dog

b) the man in the corner's dog

c) the man who is drinking's dog

In example (1a) the possessive 's is preceding with the head possessor noun the *man*, by contrast, in (1b) and (1c) the possessor 's not follows the head possessive noun but the final word of the phrase. This feature of unselectivity is a clear evidence for the possessive 's to be analyzed as a clitic, an enclitic.

4. Discussion

The leaning property of a clitic in English relies much on the orthographical form which differentiate from independent words. However, Chinese characters behave independently in orthographical forms, which makes it difficult to judge whether it is a clitic or not. Besides, in English, there are also some unstressed functional lexemes such as '-ed/-s/-ful/-tion', but linguistics considered them to be derivational or inflectional affix, mainly because they are dependent elements of words but not words themselves. However, most of the Chinese functional words behave in the opposite way—they are considered independent word. The question therefore arises is how to judge a Chinese clitic and this paper attempts to explore this question with the Chinese sentence final particles as an instance .

As pointed out in the literature part, clitics are typically phonologically reduced forms. Judging by this feature, it might be possible to justify clitics in Chinese. However, there's a large number of words in Chinese which are phonologically reduced due to prosodic features. For example, Chinese word 东西 (dong xi) can mean 'thing' if it is pronounced in stress-weak form, but can also refer to 'the direction of east and west' when pronounced with equal weight. Many words behave in similar way, and it makes no sense that they are all clitics. Therefore, it is necessary and reasonable to focus only on those unstressed functional words. Based on empirical studies, Lin and Wang (1992) classified Chinese unstressed functional words into 6 groups:

- (1) 吧、吗、呢、啊
- (2) 们、子、头、么
- (3) 的、地、得, 了、着、过
- (4) 上、里
- (5) (说)说、(看)看、(想)想
- (6) (走)出、(拿)来、(出)去

This paper will limit the discussion to two morphemes in the group, i.e. 呢 ne and 们 men, to explore whether they are clitics nor not.

The first criterion proposed by Zwicky (1983) was that "Clitics can exhibit a low degree of selection with respect to their hosts while affixes exhibit a high degree of selection with respect to their stems."

The Chinese morpheme 呢 ne is usually tagged to the end of a sentence at the final position. Therefore, it is also called the final particle or sentence particle (Chu 1984 and Chang 1994). It can be used as a mood particle, i.e. to mark the interrogative mood of the sentence, or can be marked as a modal particle as they make the sentence sounds more "mild and moderate"(Chang 1994: 89).

In interrogative sentences, 呢 ne and 吗 ma are always mutually complementary. Ne is always a final particle of wh- questions, and can be preceded with words of different word class. In example 2) ~7), ne is preceded with 'what'(pronoun), 'on' (preposition), 'cotton' (noun), 'all right'(adjective phrase), 'inspiration' (noun) and 'bargain' (verb) respectively, a clear demonstration that ne behave as a clitic because words preceding ne are from various grammatical categories and there is little restriction of the words that they can be adjacent to and this unselectivity to the hosts is one of the crucial property of a clitic.

Example 2) ~7) ①

干 啥 呢?

Do what ne?

(What are you doing?)

墙 上 呢 ?

Wall on ne?

(What about on the wall?)

你 还 不 如 去 种 棉 花 呢!

You still not even to grow cotton ne!

(You might as well grow cotton!)

那 哪 行 呢?

That how all right ne?

(How can it be all right?)

或许 会 受 不少 启发 呢!

Maybe will get much inspiration ne

(Maybe I will get a lot inspiration!)

这 是 交易 双方 在 讨价还价 呢!

This is both parties are bargain ne

(This is that both parties are bargaining!)

Comparatively, Chinese particle 们 men behaves like plural forms in English, attaching merely to nouns as is shown in example 8)^② and therefore 们 men is more an affix than a clitic regarding the host selectivity.

Example 8)

同学 们 孩子 们 大学生 们

Classmates children college students

The second criterion proposed by Zwicky (1983) is that "arbitrary gaps in the set of combinations are more characteristic of affixed words than of clitic groups." For example, English past tense is usually -ed form, but there's also many irregular past tense verbs and the word 'stride' even has no past tense. As to Chinese morpheme ne and men, both of them show no arbitrary gap in the combination with hosts, much of which ascribe to the reason that Chinese is a non-inflectional language and the change in forms is not a typical operation in Chinese. For similar reason, the third criterion of morphophonological properties are also not appropriately applicable to judge clitics in Chinese because "written Chinese is ideographic, consisting of an individual character or ideogram for every syllable, with each character representing an object or idea rather than a sound." (Jing, L., et al, 2006)

With regard to the fourth criteria that "Semantic idiosyncrasies are more characteristic of affixed words than of clitic groups.," 呢 ne and 们 men exhibit different behaviors. The semantic meaning of 呢 ne seems to have a number of functions and meanings such as expressing 'personal concern', 'speaker's uncertainty', 'intensive inquiry' and 'obviousness' (Shao, 1982; Chappell 1991; Chu 1998), but Chu, C. (2009) summarize them into two core meaning, i.e. 'looking back for a contrast' and 'a demand to continue' and claiming that "all the numerous otherwise unrelated meanings/uses/interpretations that have hitherto been proposed for it can be directly or indirectly derived." However, 们 men seems to exhibit semantic idiosyncrasies in the meaning of plural forms. Plural marker men can be attached to personal pronoun and nouns referring to human but cannot be attached to nouns other than human as the example 9 shows.

Example 9)

老师 们 他们 * 猴子 们 * 桌子 们

teachers they monkeys tables

Besides, in the sentence 10a) "老师带同学们去野餐", the subject "teacher" can be understood either as singular form or plural form, i.e. either one teacher or more than one teacher is possible interpretation. Therefore, the subject noun without 们 men (10a) can express the same meaning as that with men (10b), while in the sentence (10c) "**老师带十个同学们去野餐" is grammatically unaccepted. Lardiere (2008) explained that in Chinese, "Nouns may receive a plural interpretation apparently similar to that in English when they co-occur with a quantifier (other than 'one') and a classifier, but without overt plural marking on the noun." Example 10)

老师 带 同学们 去 野餐。

The teacher took students to picnic.

Or 2) The teachers_u took students to picnic.

(The teacher/teachers took students on a picnic.)

老师们 带 同学们 去 野餐。

The teachers_u took students to picnic.

(The teachers took students on a picnic.)

* 老师 带 十个 同学 *们 去 野餐。

The teacher/teachers took ten students to picnic.

(The teachers took ten students on a picnic.)

The plurality marker men is also restrictive in existential structure as is shown in the example ^[21] and ^[22] below (excerpted from Lardiere,2008). Lardiere suggested that “Nouns with -men must be definite, their existence cannot be posited in existential constructions, which would create a definiteness effect violation, nor can these be negated.” Lexical Integrity criterion that “syntactic rules can affect affixed words, but cannot affect clitic groups.”

[21] *you ren-men have person-PL 'there are some persons'	cf.	you ren have person 'there is/are some person(s)'
[22] *mei you ren-men not have person-PL 'there is nobody'	cf.	mei you ren not have person 'there is nobody'

On the contrary, 呢 ne shows no such change with alteration in syntactic structure as it is always tagged at the final position of an utterance. In example 12), the syntactic alteration leads to no influences on the sentence final morpheme ne.

Example 11)

带 谁 去 野餐 呢?

Take who to picnic ne?

(Who shall be taken to picnic?)

谁 带 同学们 去 野餐 了 呢?

Who took students to picnic le^③ ne?

(Who has taken students to picnic?)

10b) is also an evidence for ne as a clitic in terms of the Clitic-affix ordering criterion that “Clitics can attach to material already containing clitics, but affixes cannot.” The aspectual marker le is one of the unstressed functional words in Chinese, and some linguistics considered it as affix while others believe it clitics. Taken it as a clitic, then the structure of “le ne” demonstrate a clitic being contained by a clitic while affixes never do.

As a matter of fact, ne is not the least selective to the leaning word and many clitics can be put in front of it. The ne cluster with undisputed clitic, such as de(的), zi(子), tou(头), which form 'de ne', 'zi ne', 'tou ne', are quite common combination as in “谁的呢? (de ne') 谁的桌子呢? (zi ne') 谁在里头呢? (tou ne')”. Comparatively, it is difficult to find such combination of common clitics such as 的 de, 子 zi, 头 tou with the morpheme 们 men. As can be seen, *de men ?^④ zi men *tou men are almost unacceptable clusters.

Example 12)

带 谁 去 野餐 呢?

Take who to picnic ne?

(Who shall be taken to picnic?)

谁带同学们去野餐了呢?

Who took students to picnic le ne?

(Who has taken students on a picnic?)

5. Conclusion

As has been discussed, *ne* is more inclined to be a clitic while *men* is more affix-like. Though both of them cannot stand alone and both are unstressed functional words, their behaviour differs to some extent.

A possible reason for their different grammatical extent might be due to the development of language, which is analogous to English affixes and clitics. Lowe (2016) examined the diachronic development of phrasal possessives in PDE (present-day English) and mentioned a development of degrammaticalization of English possessive -s which clearly began life as an affix, but became a genitive case morpheme and later a clitic. Lowe suggested that we “ must acknowledge a gradual process of change over time.”

Spencer (1991) explains that “Typically, clitics are function words, such as modal participles, conjunctions, pronominals or auxiliary verbs. Historically, they generally develop from fully fledged words and frequently develop into inflectional affixes...In general, cliticization is freer and less restricted lexically than affixation, in the sense that clitics will typically attach themselves to any old word provided it is in the right position in the sentence, while affixes usually only attach to specific classes of words or stems”.

Similarly, it is probable that Chinese clitics also lie in a degrammaticalisation development phase intermediate in between the morphology development continuum as in shown in the Figure 1 below.

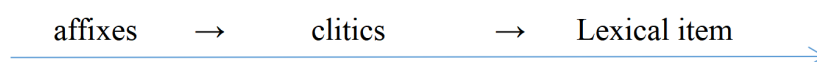


Figure 1 Development Continuum

The degrammaticalization perspective also provides a framework for understanding why affixes and clitics are not always clearly distinguishable, and why some linguists consider clitics as an intermediate form between words and affixes, while others view certain morphemes as both clitics and affixes. Given that Chinese is a paratactic language whereas English is a hypotactic one, applying criteria originally developed for judging English clitics and affixes may require more flexible adjustments and a larger corpus of data. This limitation should be taken into consideration if further research is conducted in this area.

Notes

- ① From: *Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese version 1* (LCMCv1, Brown family, 1991, created by Richard Xiao): powered by *CQPweb*(<http://114.251.154.212/cqp/lcmc/>).
- ② taken from collocation of 们 in Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese version 1.
- ③ le is considered an aspectual marker, expressing perfect aspect.
- ④ ? means partially acceptable.

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