

An evolutionary approach to semasiological change: Overt influence attempts through the development of the Mandarin 吧-ba particle



Vittorio Tantucci

C87, Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University, United Kingdom¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the pragmatics of overt influence attempts (cf. Reich, 2011, 2012; Tantucci, 2016a) and their cognitive relationship with semasiological change. As a case study, the present analysis is centred on the recent history of the Mandarin 吧-*ba* sentence-final particle, starting from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) up to its present day usage. Corpus-based data from the CCL Peking corpus highlight a progressive shift from an original directive usage towards a later assertive employment. In the latter case, speaker/writer ‘invites’ addressee/reader to agree with his/her statement on the basis of what is ‘socially’ or ‘interpersonally’ expected to be true/sensible. The cooperatively ‘expected action’ originally prompted by the particle, will then turn into cooperatively ‘expected certainty’ in later usages. From an evolutionary-psychological angle, at every stage of the cline it emerges the speaker/writer’s consistent attempt to exert social influence on addressee/reader in the form of an ‘interested’ co-act proposal (cf. Reich, 2011; Tantucci, 2016b).
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1. Introduction

This paper proposes an evolutionary approach to address semasiological change (cf. Traugott and Dasher, 2002). Drawing on the so-called ‘pragmatic-turn’ in cognitive science (i.e. Varela et al., 1992; Noë, 2004; Bowles, 2006; Clark, 2008) I argue that one important trigger of semasiological reanalysis is the speaker/writer’s (Sp/w) attempt to exert influence on the addressee/reader (Ad/r) in the form of a co-action. This entails that the constructional/semasiological changes that intersect with the illocutionary force of a speech act are not merely symbolic, but crucially ‘enactive’ (cf. Engel et al., 2014), viz. dynamically aimed at exerting cognitive and social influence (cf. Reich, 2011, 2012; Tantucci, 2016a). Clearly, this does not entail a teleological motivation (cf. Croft, 2000) for language change, but rather unveils cases where reanalysis occurs in contexts of overt influence attempts (OIA) (i.e. Reich, 2011) from Sp/w in the direction to Ad/r. This approach complements existing evolutionary models of language change (i.e. Croft, 2000; Beckner et al., 2009) as it distinctively tackles Ad/r’s agency as a decisive element of language innovation.

E-mail address: v.tantucci@lancs.ac.uk.

¹ <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/linguistics/about-us/people/vittorio-tantucci>.

As a case study, I provide corpus-based evidence from the Peking-corpus CCL² suggesting that the usage Mandarin sentence-final particle 吧-*ba* diachronically shifts from predominantly physical to new epistemic forms of co-act proposals (CAP). In the latter case, Sp/w's utterance is based on extended-intersubjectivity (cf. Tantucci, 2013, 2017) and construes an 'interested' joint project at the epistemic level, rather than the physical one.

This paper is structured as follows: In section 2 I give a general overview of CAP theory and the new 'pragmatic turn' in cognitive sciences and evolutionary psychology. In sections 2.1 and 2.2 I illustrate how a CAP approach to language change may shed new light on underlying motivations of semasiology and intersubjectification. Section 3 is centred on the Mandarin sentence final particle 吧-*ba* and re-discusses it from a new enactive angle. Section 4 is dedicated to a corpus-based enquiry about the semasiological change of 吧-*ba* from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) up to the present. This change instantiates as a form of actuation, viz. the spread of an already existing construction (e.g. De Smet, 2012) and will impinge on two different construals of intersubjectivity: from an originally Ad/r's oriented one encoding immediate intersubjectivity I-I, to a more recent 3rd party's oriented one, construing extended intersubjectivity E-I (cf. Tantucci, 2013, 2015a, 2016b, 2016d, 2017; Guardamagna, 2017; Van Olmen, 2017).

2. CAP theory and the enactive view

The so-called co-act proposals (CAP) theory intersects with the recent so-called 'pragmatic-turn' in cognitive neuroscience, in which action and cognition are considered to be part of a continuum. CAP theory is first proposed in Reich (2011, 2012), where traditional speech acts are re-thought as overt influence attempts (OIA). OIA constitute "proposals or requests for the addressee to carry out a cooperative response" with a special focus on "how the agency of addressees is implied by the performance of many communicative acts" (Reich, 2011:1349).

This view is in opposition with the traditional Austinian-Searlean model of communicative acts (cf. Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Searle and Vanderveken, 1985) which posits that communication primarily aims at sharing meanings. Quite differently, the OIA model draws on evolutionary theory and emphasises that human communication is realised through **co-act proposals (CAP)**, with the essential aim of exerting social influence. In this respect, the classic Austinian-Searlean model does not capture "the way in which a speaker [...] uses an overtly intentional signal to solicit cooperation from a hearer (addressee)" (Reich, 2011:1350). It is important to note that most activity in consciousness science and embodiment theory has traditionally placed great emphasis on the cognitive correlates of perception, independently of action. From a cognitive-linguistic angle, Schmid (2016:543) stresses the need to integrate and operationalise social and pragmatic aspects in a cognitive-linguistic framework.

Crucially, recent studies from evolutionary psychology markedly emphasise the role of cooperation with conspecifics as a central trait of human evolution (Henrich and Henrich, 2007; Tomasello, 2009). In the last two decades a new experimental agenda has been emerging in cognitive science, departing from traditional representation-centred and so-called 'spectator theories' (cf. Schilbach et al., 2013) in the direction of 'enactive' cognitive paradigms subserving action and grounded in sensorimotor skills (cf. Varela et al., 1992; Noë, 2004; Clark, 2008; Engel et al., 2014). The **enactive view** of social cognition is built upon the following assumptions:

- Cognition is understood as the capacity to generate structure by action.
- The cognitive agent is immersed in its task domain.
- System states acquire meaning through their functional role in the context of action.
- The functioning of cognitive systems is thought to be inseparable from embodiment.
- A holistic view on the architecture of cognitive systems prevails, emphasising the dynamic nature and context-sensitivity of processing.
- Models of cognition take into account the "extended" nature of cognitive systems.

(cf. Engel et al., 2014:3)

Enactive cooperation is primarily rooted in the structure of communicative exchanges and individual communicative acts. This entails that "the shape of communicative acts and the way they assemble into larger units could be geared towards social cooperation, echoing the fact that they are devices which support coordinated activities" (Reich, 2011:1350). This perspective aims at "grounding social cognition in joint action (including, e.g. synchronized movements)" (cf. Engel et al., 2014:9).

Co-act proposals (CAPs) are '**interested**' forms of "joint projects" (cf. Clark, 1996; Bangerter and Clark, 2003). They are easily identified in contexts of 'language-for-action' so to say, where directive or interrogative communicative acts

² http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/ (last accessed: 19.03.17).

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