From collocation to idiomatic expression: The grammaticalization of hao phrases/constructions in Mandarin Chinese*

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Abstract

Some recent studies concerning language use have shown the significance of frequency/routinization and collocation in the evolution of language structure and grammaticalization. Repeated daily (spoken) language use is believed to be the shaping force of linguistic structure. Linguistic contiguity is further proposed as one of the important sources leading to grammaticalization. In response to these interests in the relationship between syntagmatic association and grammaticalization, we conduct a synchronic case study of hao ‘good’ in Mandarin as it is used in modern spoken and written Chinese. Specifically, we examine the ways hao is used as a part of some constructions that convey stance. We argue that in these phrases/constructions hao has de-categorized from being of a major lexical category (stative verb), and the phrases/constructions have grammaticalized into processing units with fixed prosodic and/or morphosyntactic coding, idiomatic meaning, and specific interactional function. This case study calls attention to collocates, constructions, and phrasal expressions, whose prominent presence blurs the distinction between lexicon and syntax, and demands reconsideration of the model for mental grammar.

Keywords
grammaticalization, collocation, construction, frequency, idiomatic expression, Mandarin hao

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1 Introduction

Some recent studies concerning language use have shown the significance of frequency/routinization and collocation in the evolution of language structure and grammaticalization (e.g., Bybee & Hopper 2001). Repeated daily (spoken) language use is believed to be the shaping force of linguistic structure (Hopper 1988). Linguistic contiguity is further proposed as one of the important sources leading to grammaticalization (Biq 2001, 2002; Hopper & Traugott 1993; H. Tao 2001; Tao 2003; L. Tao 2002; Thompson & Mulac 1991; Traugott & Dasher 2002). In response to these interests in the relationship between syntagmatic association and grammaticalization, we conduct, in this paper, a synchronic case study of hao ‘good’ in Mandarin as it is used in modern spoken and written Chinese. Specifically, we examine the ways hao is used as a part of some constructions that convey stance. We argue that in these phrases/constructions hao has de-categorized from being of a major lexical category (stative verb), and the phrases/constructions have grammaticalized into processing units with fixed prosodic and/or morphosyntactic coding, idiomatic meaning, and specific interactional function.

2 Background

2.1 Past studies of hao

Hao ‘good’ is a lexical item with multiple meanings, versatile functions, and high occurrence frequency whose importance is recognized by probably everyone working in Chinese linguistics. However, while the word is always discussed in grammar survey books, it is usually not an object for in-depth study. Lü (1980) probably gives the most comprehensive description of the various functions hao can serve from the traditional, structure-oriented point of view. It surveys the various meanings that hao can convey as an adjective, an adverb, an auxiliary, and a noun. It also lists several additional entries in which hao is part of the expression/construction. On the other hand, Miracle (1991) supplements what traditional descriptive works lack, i.e., an account from the discourse-pragmatic point of view. He addresses the functions hao serves at the discourse, rather than sentential, level, which mainly concerns textual organization or the management of social acts. He notes that these discourse functions are, however, closely related to the various intra-sentential grammatical functions of hao, which include, most importantly, as a stative verb denoting ‘good, well, satisfactory’ and as a post-verbal resultative expressing satisfactory completion of the action (denoted by the V).

As a matter of fact, hao can be used to signal a variety of interactional functions at the

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1 such as in the lexical expression, haoxiang ‘seem, appear’, or in the construction, X ye hao, Y ye hao, Z ‘No matter whether X or Y, (it is always) Z’
discourse level. Occurring alone, hao can not only terminate a topic, but also express the
speaker’s acknowledgement or agreement regarding what the interlocutor has said.
Combined with other linguistic elements, hao can express an even wider range of
communicative functions, including greeting (e.g., Ni hao! ‘How are you?’) and negotiation
of various sorts, e.g., Hao de! for assent; Hao ba! Hao la! Or Hao ma! – all indicating
concession to various extents. These discourse meanings/functions are largely
unexplored.  

2.2 Objective, methodology, and database

The development in corpus linguistics in the past few decades has brought our attention to
the contiguous relationship between linguistic elements (e.g., Biber et al. 1999; Sinclair
1991; Stubbs 2002). On the other hand, sequentiality, especially frequent and routinized
sequentiality in spoken language, has been hailed as an important source for language
change by functionalists who believe that language use influences language structure (e.g.,
Ochs et al. 1996; Bybee & Hopper 2001). Inspired by these current trends in linguistics,
this paper examines the behavior of hao from the perspective of (intra-clausal) contiguity
and (discourse) sequentiality, employing notions and methodologies from both corpus
linguistics and the discourse-pragmatic approach to grammar. We hope to be able to shed
new light on some of the uses that hao exhibits by examining “the company it keeps most
often”. Thus, we will first find out which linguistic elements are the most frequently
co-occurring items on the left and on the right side of hao. Next, narrowing down to one
such element on each side, we conduct a detailed study for each case. In particular, we
address the co-occurrence of hao + le and of hai + hao. Our analysis of these two cases
pays attention to the polysemous readings or pragmatic inferences that each pattern displays.
In identifying these meanings or inferences, we draw upon the basic analytical principles of
conversation analysis (Sacks et al. 1974; Levinson 1983) and insights from studies of
pragmatic strengthening and subjectification in semantic change (Traugott 1988, 1989;
Traugott & Dasher 2002), of the relationship between discourse patterns and
grammaticalization (Thompson & Mulac 1991; Tao 2001; Tao 2003), and of the
expression of evaluation and stance in language (Hunston & Thompson 2000; Scheibman
2002). In examining the structural relationship between hao and its neighbor, we question
whether their co-occurrence is based on the open choice principle or the idiom principle
(Erman & Warren 2000; Sinclair 1991), and whether the co-occurrence has evolved into
some idiomatic expressions with a stabilized constructional frame (Fillmore et al. 1988).
To find out whether spoken language is more “progressive” than written language in terms
of grammaticalization, we follow recent corpus linguistic studies of lexical semantics
(Biber et al. 1999; Stubbs 2002) in making cross-text-type comparisons.

The focus of this study lies in the co-occurrence patterns containing hao and their
respective interpretations in casual conversation, a speech mode that is characteristically
spontaneous and interactive. Our spoken database consists of about 15 hours of
recordings of naturally occurring Mandarin conversation spoken in Taiwan. Some of the

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2 but cf. recent research in conversational Mandarin, such as Wang (2002).

3 All recordings are transcribed in terms of intonation unit (each line in the transcription
standing for one intonation unit), which is defined roughly as ‘a stretch of speech uttered
under a single coherent intonation contour’ (Du Bois et al. 1993: 47). The gloss
conventions for the grammatical roles are: 2P – second person plural, 2S – second person
narrative works by some 20th century Chinese writers are checked for comparison’s sake.\textsuperscript{4} We also consult an online database of contemporary expository written Chinese.\textsuperscript{5} Although these two written databases are relatively small, they allow access to the neighboring texts of a token occurrence of the key item, which is essential for checking the discourse functions we aim to investigate here.

In the following, we first present in Section 3 a preliminary survey of hao’s frequently co-occurring linguistic elements in interactive discourse. Then, in Section 4 we focus on hao + le and in Section 5 hai + hao. Section 6 is the conclusion.

3 Hao in interactive discourse

If we look at our data from the collocational perspective, i.e., examining which linguistic item co-occurs with which other linguistic item, we get very different pictures about how these items work with each other in different modes of communication. In this section, we conduct a preliminary survey of how hao is used in the company of other linguistic elements in spoken, interactive discourse.

It is important to note that the token numbers provided in this section are just rounded-up numbers from a rough check before “problematic” tokens are discarded – such as tokens that cannot be interpreted (i.e., analyzed) because of truncated speech or false start, etc.

We have found about 1700 tokens of hao. This excludes tokens of hao occurring as part of a word, such as in haoxiang ‘seem, appear’. First, given that intonation unit (IU) is the basic speech unit in our analysis framework, we check if hao occurs independently in an IU, i.e., whether hao singly occupies an IU or not. Indeed, there are about 100 such tokens. They are used either as a response to a request or as a marker for topic transition (see discussion of similar function by hao le below).

Before we proceed to survey the left and right collocates of hao, we should mention that there are about 80 tokens of hao bu hao ‘OK?’. Such an impressive frequency is surely due to the fact that in interactional discourse it is used as a device for negotiation between speakers.

Now let us consider hao and its favorite right collocates. First, there are about 280 tokens of hao occurring immediately before an IU boundary without any linguistic element to its right (but with some other linguistic elements to its left). Then, the most frequent right collocating linguistic element is le, which can be an aspect marker or a sentence final particle. There are about 150 tokens of hao le. In addition, there are, in descending order, hao la – 90, hao de – 80, hao a – 70, and hao ba – 40. Most of these favorite right collocates – le, la, a, ba – are sentence final particles expressing various subjunctive moods (Li & Thompson 1981; [Liu et al.] 1983/1996; [Lü] 1980). De, on the other hand, is

\begin{itemize}
\item singular, 3S – third person singular,
\item ADV – adverbial marker,
\item CLFT – shi...de cleft construction,
\item ING – progressive,
\item INT – intensifier,
\item ITJ – interjection,
\item M – measure word,
\item MOD – modification relation,
\item NEG – negation,
\item OBJ – preposed-object marker,
\item PFT – perfective marker,
\item Q – question marker.
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{5} This is the online archive of the past issues (1996 to early 2003) of Sinorama, a Taiwanese magazine of general interests (http://db.sinorama.com.tw/ch/search).
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one of the most frequently used linguistic elements in Chinese. The expression, hao de, has several functions. In addition to expressing assent in interaction, as mentioned in Section 2.1, it could be an attributive modifying the immediately following noun; it could also be the predicate part in the cleft shi...de construction.

Next, let us take a look at the left collocates that hao most frequently occurs with. We find about 200 tokens of bu hao. Bu is a negation marker. Its high collocation rate with the frequently used stative verb hao is not surprising. In fact, a closer look reveals that the 200 tokens include 80 tokens of the hao bu hao expression mentioned earlier and 30 tokens of another expression, gao bu hao (literally, ‘if things get out of control’; idiomatically, ‘maybe’), which is often used in colloquial speech. In other words, the real “NEG + hao (SV)” construction has about 90 tokens at most.

The most favorite left collocate is the intensifier hen ‘very’. There are about 160 tokens of hen hao. Since the relationship between the intensifier and the stative verb it modifies is already of a constituency relation, this collocation is within our expectation and does not interest us as much as the following ones. The next favorite left collocate is the degree adverb hai ‘still, moderately’; there are about 120 tokens of hai hao. Another adverb, jiu ‘then’, comes in the third place; there are about 90 tokens of jiu hao.

Of course, the collocational patterns do not stop here, since when the left and right collocates of hao are “strung up” the interworkings of these linguistic elements become more complicated. Furthermore, we have only considered the n+1 and the n-1 positions. Collocational relations do not stop at the distance of one position each way. However, we think the quick sketch given above has sufficiently shown us the companies that hao is most closely associated with in interactional discourse.

In the remainder of this paper, we will discuss two specific collocation cases, i.e., hao + le and hai + hao. Originally, we are interested in taking a further look at them simply because of their outstanding frequency. Our further examination subsequently reveals that both cases are polysemous constructions and indeed deserve our close attention. We will discuss hao + le in Section 4 and hai + hao in Section 5.

4 “CLAUSAL SUBJ + hao le” as a recommendatory construction

The first set of collocation we want to discuss is hao plus le. Le, aspect marker for perfectivity and discourse marker for relevance to speaking situation, is one of those indispensable grammatical words in everyday talk (Li & Thompson 1981; 刘 [Liu et al.] 1983/1996; 吕 [Lü] 1980). Its high occurrence frequency in both spoken and written Chinese is beyond the question. The collocation of these two highly frequent words has created more than one uses.

4.1 Types of hao + le

There are several ways in which hao is juxtaposed with le. In terms of the grammatical functions that hao serves, the following hao + le collocation types are identified in our spoken database.

First of all, hao and le often occupy an intonation unit without other linguistic elements. Typically, this type of hao le is an expression marking discourse boundary in topic transition. Consider the following example, in which hao le signals the speaker’s intention to terminate the current (sub-)topic.
The second way hao and le are juxtaposed stems from a canonical use of hao, i.e., as a post-verbal resultative expressing perfectiveness immediately following the main verb. Le is the sentence final particle marking perfectivity – relevance to speech situation. Consider the following example:

(2) 我已經錄好了
wo yijing lu hao le
'I have got (it) recorded,'

The third way hao and le run into each other arises from another canonical use, i.e., hao as a stative predicate, meaning ‘good’ (or ‘well’ when referring to health/well being). Le is again a sentence final particle marking perfectivity – relevance to speech situation. Consider the following example:

(3) 那時候我覺得我英文夠好了
na shihou wo juede wo yingwen gou hao le
'that time I feel my English enough HAO LE
'At that time I thought my English was good enough.'

The fourth way hao and le collocate with each other takes place when hao serves again as a predicate, takes a clausal or verbal subject, and is preceded by the adverb jiu. Together, these elements form a (sufficient) conditional construction: CLAUSAL (VERBAL) SUBJ +
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\( jiu + hao + le \). Jiu is well known as a marker of sufficient condition relation (Biq 1988; Liu 1997; Lai 1999). In this construction, the clausal or verbal subject forms the premise part while hao le constitutes the conclusion part. Consider the following examples:

(4)

\[
\text{所以你以後都搭公車就好了}
\]

Suoyi ni yihou dou da gongche jiu hao le
‘So it’ll be all set as long as you take the bus from now on.’

(5)

\[
\text{可是我覺得可以賺錢就好了}
\]

Keshi wo juede keyi zhuanqian jiu hao le
‘But I thought it’s OK as long as there is profit.’

The last type of hao le collocation occurs when, again, hao is the predicate and it takes a clausal subject (but there is no jiu). It is a construction to express the speaker’s suggestion for an option. It is often an equivalent of ‘why don’t you/we’ in English. Consider the following example:

(6)

\[
\text{你們吃完你們先過去就好了}
\]

Nimen chi wan nimen xian guoqu hao le
‘Why don’t you head over there first when you finish eating (and don’t wait for me)?’

Since what is said in the clausal subject is always the option/solution endorsed or recommended by the speaker, this type is called the “CLAUSAL SUBJ + hao le” recommendatory construction in this paper.

In our spoken database, the distribution of the five types of hao + le collocation is given in Table 1. The recommendatory construction is the most frequent type (41.6%), followed by the conditional use (29.5%).

The distribution pattern emerging from our conversational data is quite different from those found in the narrative and expository written data, given in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. In written data, the recommendatory construction no longer dominates (21.7% in narrative and 10% in expository). Instead, the most frequent types are the canonical “resultative” use (29.2% in narrative and 40% in expository).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE/FUNCTION</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic transition</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = resultative</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = SV</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendatory</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1. The various senses/functions of hao+ le found in conversational data
TABLE 2. The various senses/functions of hao+ le found in narrative written data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE/FUNCTION</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic transition</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = resultative</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = SV</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendatory</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>833</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3. The various senses/functions of hao+ le found in expository written data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE/FUNCTION</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic transition</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = resultative</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao = SV</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendatory</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there are many interesting points worthy of our attention in this cross-text-type comparison, we will concentrate on examining the recommendatory use in the following discussion (and will cite examples from conversation only).

4.2 The grammaticalization of the “CLAUSAL SUBJ + hao le” construction

As has indicated in the discussion in 4.1, in both the fourth (conditional) and the fifth (recommendatory) uses, hao is the predicate in the main clause. In terms of hao’s grammatical function, these two types are just like the third type, in which hao is also the main predicate. However, we feel the recommendatory construction is worthy of our further attention from the interactional point of view. We have seen one example of this type above (example 6), which is a suggestion offered by the speaker to her addressee. In the following example, we see that the recommendatory use can be a commissive representing the speaker’s stance towards what s/he is talking about:

(7)  
那我聰明以後寫4就這樣子寫好了。
Na wo gancui yihou xie si jiu zheyangzi xie hao le
‘So I might-as-well later write four just this-way write HAO LE’

While the speech act functions may slightly differ from case to case, the recommendatory use basically conveys the speaker’s endorsement of what is said in the subject clause. Thus, a strong sense of subjectivity is expressed in this use. Several expressions often accompany this construction. Expressions such as gancui ‘might as well’ (as exemplified in (7) above), na ‘(given…) then’ (8) and buran ‘alternatively, otherwise’ (9) co-occur because consideration of alternatives is involved here. The strongly evaluative expressions wo juede ‘I feel/I think’ (10) and wo kan ‘I see/I think’ (11) co-occur because of
the subjectivity.

(8)

娜我明天再打給他好了。

Na wo mingtian zai da gei ta hao le
Then I tomorrow again call to 3S HAO LE
‘Then I’ll give him a call tomorrow.’

(9)

不然我把外面的窗戶關起來好了。

Buran wo ba waimian de chuanghu guan qilai hao le
Otherwise I OBJ outside MOD window close up HAO LE
‘Or I can close up the window facing outside.’

(10)

我覺得還是去一下好了。

Wo juede hai shi qu yixia hao le
I feel still be go one-bit HAO LE
‘I think it’s better that I go (rather than not go).’

(11)

這種我看由你來講好了。

Zhe zhong wo kan you ni lai jiang hao le
This kind I see from 2S come talk HAO LE
‘(In my opinion,) why don’t you talk about this (thing)?’

A crucial point about the recommendatory use is that, as the hao le part expresses the speaker’s subjective stance (i.e., endorsement), it in fact does not alter the “propositional content” of the utterance. In other words, (6’), with hao le omitted, conveys essentially the same as (6), and the same applies to all other examples.

(6’)

你們吃完你們先過去。

Nimen chi wan nimen xian guoqu
2P eat finish 2P first go-to
‘Head over there first when you finish eating.’

Of course, there is still some difference. (6’) can be uttered by a speaker with a variety of moods. For example, s/he can say this as a command. However, when hao le is added, as in (6), the tone of voice is softened, and what is said in the clausal subject is presented as the speaker’s suggestion.

It is whether the hao le part constitutes part of the propositional content or not that differentiates the recommendatory type of hao le from the conditional type of hao le (i.e., the ‘CLAUSAL/VERBAL SUBJECT + jiu + hao + le’). In the conditional type, hao le constitutes the predicate (i.e., conclusion) and is indispensable to the completion of the sentential meaning (i.e., premise-conclusion). While the hao le part in the conditional type very often conveys the speaker’s subjective judgment as to what is “OK, satisfactory, or good”, it is not necessarily always personal. In many examples, the jiu hao le part
conveys an “objective” judgment, reflecting socio-cultural standards or norm. The construction simply specifies the sufficient conditions required for obtaining the desired satisfactory “consequence”. There is not necessarily personal endorsement involved. Thus, in contrast to the recommendatory hao le construction, the conditional jiu hao le construction is not “epistemic” in the sense that the meaning of the construction is still part of the conveyed message, rather than about how the message is conveyed.

When grammar and discourse are taken into consideration at the same time, the recommendatory construction becomes interesting because the grammatical main predicate does not contribute to the propositional but rather the epistemic part of the “message” of the whole utterance. This is reminiscent of the I think type of epistemic phrases found in many languages that are highly recurrent in interactional discourse. These epistemic phrases illustrate ‘the type of grammaticization in which a governing or head element is reanalyzed as a governed or dependent element’ (Thompson & Mulac 1991: 323). In our case, it is the main predicate (stative verb plus sentence final perfective marker) turning into something like a stance adverb. This is of course the de-categorialization phenomenon characteristic of grammaticalization (Hopper 1991), in which major lexical categories (e.g., noun and verb) shift towards secondary categories (e.g., preposition and adverb). Furthermore, as pointed out above, the recommendatory use of hao le is only one of the subtypes of how hao as a stative verb can be used. The recommendatory construction actually requires that the subject be a clause. Other subtypes of hao le as the main predicate taking other types of subject are still widely used at the same time. Thus, we see in the case of hao le another characteristic of grammaticalization, i.e., layering – the regular, canonical uses and the newer, grammaticalized uses co-exist with each other.

4.3 Summary

To sum up, in this section we have distinguished five ways that hao and le can co-occur in terms of the grammatical functions of hao. Their distributions in spoken interactional discourse and in narrative and expository written discourse are quite different. We examined the “CLAUSAL SUBJ + hao le” construction in spoken discourse in detail because it is distinguished from other types of hao + le collocation by the subjectivity it conveys. It is a recommendatory construction to express the speaker’s commitment (endorsement) to what is said in the clausal subject. In this construction, hao le has decategorialized from being a stative verb (plus the perfective marker) into something close to an epistemic adverb expressing stance. It is thus a grammaticalized epistemic construction mostly seen in interactional discourse.6

5 Hai hao as an evaluative phrase

In this section, we study the second set of collocation, hai + hao. Hai ‘still/even, also, moderately’ is an adverb indispensable in characterizing degree, duration, and comparison (Li & Thompson 1981; [Liu et al.] 1983/1996; [Lü] 1980; Yeh 1998).

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6 Note that the percentage of the evaluative use in our narrative database is not a minority (21.7%). As a matter of fact, all the tokens of such use are found in the quoted speech attributed to the characters in the story.
5.1 Three types of hai + hao

The collocation of the adverb hai and hao is frequent in both spoken and written Chinese. The two words manifest at least three types of collocation relationship according to how they are combined. In the first type, the two words are strung together through the choice principle and they independently contribute meaning to the meaning of the whole sentence. In the following example, hai is a sentential adverb, meaning ‘furthermore’ and hao is an intensifier modifying the stative verb, re ‘hot’.

(12)

G: 這種夏天裡面能住嗎？
    Zhe zhong xiatian limian neng zhu ma
    This kind summer inside can live Q

-> L:  
    而且還好熱呢。
    Erqie hai hao re o
    Furthermore still INT hot ITJ

G: Can this kind (of place) accommodate people in the summer?

-> L: **And/furthermore** it is **so** hot (in there).

In the second type of collocation relation, the two words form a compound, haihao, with its fully lexicalized meaning ‘luckily, fortunately’. Consider the following example:

(13)

A: 還要我沒去，
    Haihao wo mei qu
    Fortunately I NEG go

A: **Fortunately** I did not go.

In the third type, the two words form a phrasal expression, in which the internal relationship between the two words are tighter than that in the first type but not as lexicalized as that in the second type. In terms of their grammatical function, hao should be taken as the stative predicate meaning ‘good, satisfactory’ and hai is the adverb modifying it, meaning ‘still, barely, moderately’. The pair starts out as a straightforward ADV + SV combination, and primarily expresses a neutral-to-good evaluation, ‘It’s OK/It’s not bad/It’s acceptable’, and is optionally followed by interjections such as la, ba or a. For example:

(14)

C:  我是日文研究所畢業的
    Wo shi Riwen yanjiusuo biye de
    I be Japanese grad-school graduate CLFT

A:  哦，那就是很懂囉。
    Oh na jiu shi hen dong lo
    ITJ then just be INT understand ITJ

-> C:  還好啦。
We recognize this particular use as a phrasal type (coded as \textit{hai hao} with a space in between the two words) because it has occurred highly frequently in spoken discourse and has been used to convey a set of subtly differentiated meanings, which we will discuss below. The high occurrence frequency of \textit{hai hao} in conversation discourse is due to the fact that speakers sometimes opt for vague or neutral rather than absolute or specific evaluative comments in social interaction. There is one more reason \textit{hai hao} is recognized as a phrase rather than just an ADV + SV combination: the majority of the tokens (with the optional interjections \textit{la/ba/a}) we found in our conversation data are immediately followed by an IU boundary. The first two types of \textit{hai hao}, on the other hand, rarely occur right before an IU boundary (unless there is a restart) but are always followed by some other lexical elements. Thus, the distinction between the phrasal use and the other two types of \textit{hai hao} is prosodically and sequentially clear.

In our conversational database, the phrasal \textit{hai hao} far exceeds the other two types of collocation in terms of frequency, as seen in Table 4. On the other hand, our two written databases show different pictures about how \textit{hao} is used, as seen in Table 5 and Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\textit{hai} (adv) + \textit{hao} (adv)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{haihao} (compound)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{hai hao} (phrasal)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4. The various senses/functions of \textit{hai+hao} found in conversational data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\textit{hai} (adv) + \textit{hao} (adv)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{haihao} (compound)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{hai hao} (phrasal)</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(X \textit{hai hao}, Y)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The \textit{X hai hao, Y ‘X (situation) is OK, but Y (situation) (is not OK)’} construction, as exemplified in the following constructed example, is a minority in the narrative written data.

Ta bu gongzuo \textit{hai hao, yi gongzuo jiu touteng}.
3s NEG work HAI HAO once work then headache
‘It’s OK if he is not working, but once he starts working he gets headaches.’
Table 5. The various senses/functions of hai + hao found in narrative written data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hai (adv) + hao (adv)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haihao (compound)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai hao (phrasal)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. The various senses/functions of hai + hao found in expository written data

While in all three text types the combination of hai and hao by the choice principle is the minority, in the expository written database the compound use is the most conspicuous type (64%) but in both the conversational and the narrative written databases the phrasal use dominates (80% and 45% respectively). Again, we will focus on the phrasal hai hao in the following discussion (and cite only conversational examples).

5.2 Further analysis of Hai hao

In this paper, we call the phrasal use of hai hao an evaluative phrase. However, in treating our data, we make a further distinction: the phrasal hai hao can be used either in an evaluative turn or in a counter-evaluative turn. The latter is the current speaker’s reaction to the evaluation just offered by the prior speaker. In our database, the phrasal hai hao is distributed almost evenly in these two subtypes – 53% (n=46) in evaluative turns, and 47% (n=40) in counter-evaluative turns.

From the literal meaning of the two words, hai ‘still’ and hao ‘good’, it should be most reasonable that when hai and hao are combined, the expression means ‘still good’, i.e., ‘good, but not that good’. We call it “low positive”, i.e., the ranking is “low positive/neutral” on the evaluative scale. In interactional discourse, however, occurrences of hai hao can also be interpreted as “mild negative” – worse than neutral but not that bad. These alternative interpretations are pragmatically derived mostly because the speaker also gives some other positive, or negative, remarks along with the use of hai hao.

Whether the evaluative hai hao is interpreted as low positive/neutral or mild negative, an evaluative scale is implied. A further extension of the evaluative use, however, turns out to be a denial of such a scale. In such cases, hai hao means ‘nothing in particular, nothing remarkable’, or it is even used to indicate negation.

In the following, we discuss how hai hao is used positively and negatively in evaluative turns in 5.2.1. In 5.2.2 we discuss how it is used positively and negatively in counter-evaluative turns. In 5.2.3 we discuss the extensional use of hai hao that flouts the evaluative scale as it expresses ‘nothing remarkable’ or even indicates negation.

5.2.1 In evaluative turns

As an evaluative, hai hao is typically used to cast a neutral evaluation – not too positive, nor too negative. This usually conveys the speaker’s non-committal stance. Consider

The construction is not found in the other two databases, perhaps due to their relatively small size.
the following example, where speaker B says his classmates’ evaluation of a movie is ‘so so’. Note that speaker A double checked by asking if the viewer thought it was actually lousy, but speaker B only committed to a neutral ‘so so’.

(15)

A: 你同学有人去看呀?
Ni tongxue you ren qu kan ya
2S classmate have person go watch ITJ
B: 好像有人去看.
Hoaxing you ren qu kan
Seem have person go watch
A: 好不好看?
Hao bu hao kan
Good NEG good watch
B: 他們就說，
Tamen jiu shuo
They just say
-> 應好吧.
Hai hao ba
HAI HAO ITJ
A: 還好?
Hai hao
HAI HAO
B: 對呀.
Dui ya
Right ITJ
A: 他他沒有說很難看嗎?
Ta ta meiyou shou hen nan kan ma
3S 3S NEG-have say INT bad watch Q
B: 他就說那個什麼，
Ta jiu shuo na ge shenme
3S just say that M what
-> 難看,倒还好啦，
nan kan dao hai hao la
bad watch contrary HAI HAO ITJ

A: You’ve got classmates who saw it?
B: (It seems) some people saw it.
A: Any good?
B: They just said,
-> (It’s) so so.
A: So so?
B: Yeah.
A: Didn’t he say it’s lousy?
B: He just said--,
-> Lousy(?)- well so so,
Nonetheless, many \textit{hai hao} occurrences are used as a euphemism for negative evaluation. The negative, rather than neutral, interpretation arises from the co-occurrence of \textit{hai hao} and other negative remarks in its immediate sequential context. In the following example, ‘not really that fun’ immediately follows \textit{hai hao}, rendering a mild negative interpretation of speaker A’s stance towards his trip to a scenic spot.

(16)

B: \textit{啊你有去吗?}
\begin{flushright}
A ni you qu ma
\end{flushright}

A: \textit{我有去啊!}
\begin{flushright}
Wo you qu a
\end{flushright}

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textgreater] \begin{flushright}
可是我覺得\textit{還好}.  \\
keshi wo juede \textit{hai hao}
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
but I feel \textit{HAI HAO}
\end{flushright}
\item [\textgreater] \begin{flushright}
沒有\textit{很好玩},  \\
meiyou \textit{hen hao wan}
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
NEG INT \textit{good play}
\end{flushright}
\item [\textgreater] \begin{flushright}
就\textit{回來了}.  \\
Jiu hui \textit{lai le}
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
Then return \textit{come PFT}
\end{flushright}
\end{itemize}

B: Did you go?
\begin{itemize}
\item [\textgreater] A: Yeah – I did.  But I thought it was \textbf{OK}.  It’s \textbf{not that fun}.  So I came back.
\end{itemize}

5.2.2 In counter-evaluative turns

In addition to being used to cast the speaker’s evaluation towards what is being evaluated at the time of speaking, \textit{hai hao} in counter-evaluative turns also displays the interpersonal negotiation in interactional discourse. \textit{Hai hao} in counter-evaluative turns typically occurs when the (current) speaker disagrees with the prior speaker’s opinion. As an evaluative that does not commit its speaker any strong preference either way, \textit{hai hao} is often used to show one’s disagreement with the interlocutor in a tactful way.

First of all, when what is being evaluated is a third party, \textit{hai hao} can be used by the current speaker to indicate a low positive evaluation when the prior speaker’s evaluation is perceived as too negative. Consider the following example:

(17)

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textgreater] B: \textit{師大一點特色都沒有}
\begin{flushright}
Shida yidian tese dou meiyou
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
NTNU a-bit characteristic all NEG
\end{flushright}
\item [\textgreater] A: \textit{@ \textit{還好}},  \\
O \textit{hai hao la}
\begin{flushright}
ITJ HAI HAO ITJ
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
它中間.
\end{flushright}
\end{itemize}
The NTNU campus has no characteristic.

A: Oh, ... well it’s OK (i.e., not that bad). In the middle, .. in the middle (of the entrance hallway) the way the stairs curve up, that is still some special feature.

 Hai hao can also work the other way round. When the interlocutor’s evaluation is perceived as too positive, hai hao is used as a downtoner to mitigate the evaluation to low positive or neutral. Consider the following example:

(18)

B: 台大是真的好大喔.

A: 還好, 習慣了.

Second, when the target of the evaluation is the prior speaker (or any person/object/event “identified” with him/her, given the context), the current speaker typically uses hai hao to indicate a mild disagreement about the prior speaker’s negative evaluation about him-/her-self. A disagreement notwithstanding, the current speaker’s hai hao upgrades the evaluation to the “middle ground”, which satisfies the politeness requirement. Consider the following example, in which speaker A thinks that she has got obsessive-compulsive disorder, and speaker B tries to tone down the seriousness of the matter by saying hai hao to suggest that things are not that bad.

(19)

A: 我可能有潔癖, 我在想.

B: 你有潔癖?

I’m used to it.
You have clean-compulsion
A: 有一点点。
   You yi dian dian
   Have one bit bit
   跟我媽一樣。
   Gen wo ma yiyang
   with my mother same

⇒ B: 這好啦。
   Hai hao la
   HAI HAO ITJ

A: (7 seconds) 我不停的擦擦擦。
   Wo bu ting de ca ca ca
   I NEG stop ADV wipe wipe wipe

⇒ A: I probably have obsessive-compulsive disorder for cleaning, I think.
B: You have obsessive-compulsive disorder for cleaning?
   A: A little bit,
      just like my Mom.
⇒ B: Well you’re OK.
   A: (7 seconds) I can’t stop wiping around,

Thirdly, when the target of evaluation is the current speaker (or any person/object/event “identified” with him/her, given the context), hai hao is also used to negotiate the disagreement between interlocutors. When the prior speaker’s evaluation is positive, the current speaker uses hai hao to downgrade the evaluation (to low positive/neutral) – perhaps out of politeness in many cases. Example (14) is repeated here as (20), in which the current speaker is being complimented at.

(20)
   C: 我是日文研究所畢業的。
      Wo shi Riwen yanjiusuo biye de
      I be Japanese grad-school graduate CLFT
   ⇒ A: Oh, 那就是很懂囉。
      Oh na jiu shi hen dong lo
      ITJ then just be INT understand ITJ
   ⇒ C: 還好啦。
      Hai hao la
      HAI HAO ITJ
      马马虎虎。
      Mamahuhu
      so-so

   C: 我 had an advanced degree in Japanese.
   ⇒ A: Oh, that means you know it (Japanese) very well.
   ⇒ C: It’s OK/Well (not really).
      So so.
On the other hand, there are also cases where the interlocutor’s evaluation about the current speaker is negative, and the current speaker uses hai hao to upgrade the evaluation. This is a linguistic “gesture” of defiance. Consider the following example:

(21)
B: 他有時候也很搞笑，
Ta youshihou ye hen gaoxiao
3S sometimes also INT funny
→ 你都不了解他內心搞笑的—
ni dou bu liaojie ta neixin gaoxiao de
2S all NEG understand 3S inside-heart funny MOD
A: 还好，
Hai hao
HAI HAO
我跟你講，
wo gen ni jiang
I with 2S say
其實他們這種人哦，
qishi tamen zhe zhong ren o
actually they this kind people ITJ
actually he really

-> A: Sometimes he’s funny, too. You don’t understand how funny he could really –
-> B: Well (I’m not what you think). I’ll tell you what, people like him are actually …

5.2.3 From unenthusiastic evaluation (“nothing remarkable”) to negation

A further step towards semantic bleaching for hai hao is the stripping off of evaluation and the presumed scale for evaluation. We found cases in which hai hao is used to suggest “unremarkableness”, i.e., there is nothing worth being evaluated about or worthy of the attention. The following example demonstrates how hai hao is used in its evaluative sense while a negation reading can be pragmatically derived. In this example, speaker A asks speaker B if anything interesting has happened in B’s class. It is a yes-no question and there is supposedly no evaluation involved. However, speaker B utters hai hao in response to the key term, ‘interesting’, suggesting a downtoning “low positive to neutral” evaluation – ‘nothing particularly interesting is happening’. The interlocutor, who posed the original yes-no question, can pragmatically infer a negative answer to the question, i.e., ‘there is nothing interesting happening’. Thus, in the context where a yes-no question demands an answer about the truth condition, hai hao is used as a hedge – expressing ‘nothing remarkable’ – that indirectly conveys negation.

(22)
A: 你有沒有發生一些比較有趣的事情啊？
Eh na niman
ITJ then 2P
→ Banshang a youmeiyou fasheng yixie bijiao youqu de shiqing a
Class ITJ HAVE-NEG-HAVE happen some relatively interesting MOD thing
A: So are there anything interesting happening in your class?

B: Our class? Well actually so so (i.e., nothing that I’ve noticed). It’s probably because we just got to know each other. It’s been just a few days. So we are not that familiar with each other yet. It seems nobody’s outgoing. But maybe we’ll know (who is) later. (It’s just that) we don’t know now. (That’s it!)

The following excerpt is another example in which hai hao is further bleached of its evaluative meaning. Speaker B asks speaker A whether A and A’s friend study together these days. It is again a yes-no question with no evaluation involved. However, in his answer, speaker A uses hai hao as a hedge before he finally got the firm negative answer out. Different from the last example, hai hao in this example cannot be literally referring to any positive, nor negative, value. It is an expression roughly meaning something like ‘there is nothing in particular that is worth commenting on’, or ‘there is nothing remarkable’. Its co-occurrence with the following negation, meiyou ‘no’, further strengthens its semantic extension toward a pure negative.

(23)

B: 那你們兩個現在有一起唸書嗎?
Na nimen liangge xianzai you yiqi nian shu ma
Then 2P two-M now have together study book Q

A: 嗎書哦,
B: So do you two study together now?
A: Study?
   Together? Em,
⇒ well (not really),
   no.

5.3 *Hai hao* and grammaticalization

To sum up, in this section we have distinguished three ways that *hai* and *hao* can co-occur in terms of how the two words are combined. Just as the case of *hao + le*, the distributions of these *hai + hao* types in spoken interactional discourse and in narrative and expository written discourses are quite different. We examined the phrasal *hai hao* in detail because of its high frequency in spoken discourse and the pragmatic inferences it can give rise to when the phrase is situated in its sequential context. The phrase can express what is closest to its literal meaning, i.e., low positive/neural. However, it can also suggest the speaker’s mild negative stance if in the sequential context there are other remarks indicating a negative attitude. In interactive discourse, it is often used as a hedge to counter the interlocutor’s evaluation, from positive to negative and vice versa. Furthermore, in contexts where evaluation is not in question, *hai hao* suggests “nothing is remarkable”. In its sequential association with negation markers such as *mei* or *bu*, the interpretation of its occurrence is further bleached to something like ‘nothing’ or even to negation. The semantic shifts involved in here are, in a nutshell, (1) from low positive/neural to mild negative, (2) from neutral to unremarkable, and (3) from unremarkable to negation. Just like the “CLASUAL SUBJ + hao le” construction discussed in Section 4, the phrasal *hai hao* is an example of grammaticalization, where category shifts can turn a more lexical element into a more grammatical one through semantic bleaching. In this case, the adverb *hai* and the stative verb *hao* have turned into a (phrasal) marker of mood indicating the speaker’s stance or even something close to a negation marker. The only difference between our case and the classic grammaticalization cases is that we are dealing with a phrase rather than a single lexical item. Nonetheless, it has been established in recent grammaticalization studies that frequent collocations create

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9 The evaluative use is actually also the top one in the narrative data (45%). Just like the recommendatory *hao le*, the evaluative *hai hao* tokens are all found in the characters’ quoted speech.
syntagmatic association, which often triggers semantic change of the lexical items involved in the collocation (Thompson & Mulac 1991; Traugott & Dasher 2002).

6 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze some of the frequently occurring usage patterns involving hao in Mandarin spoken discourse. We took a corpus linguistic approach to check our conversation data for the frequent collocates occurring on each side of hao. We identified the “CLAUSAL SUBJ + hao le” and the phrasal hai hao as two collocational patterns that show outstanding frequency in spoken discourse (but not necessarily so in narrative and expository written discourses). There is a good reason for their relative high frequency in spoken discourse: these two patterns are used to express stance and to negotiate views and values, both being common activities speakers engage themselves in doing in interactional discourse. As hao shifts from a stative verb to markers of mood and subjectivity, we have a case of grammaticalization. However, this grammaticalization process involves not just a single lexical item but collocates that, because of their high frequency, have become stabilized constructional or phrasal units.

It is interesting that when asked, ‘What is the meaning of hao?’, native speakers always offer the “canonical” senses (e.g., ‘good’, etc.) as answer, although our conversational data have shown that the occurrence rate of these senses are not as high as those of the evaluative senses. This suggests that the latter type of senses is not entirely tied to hao but rather to hao and its respective collocate as a whole. Isn’t it, then, reasonable to postulate that in our mental grammar, these routinized collocates are actually not subsumed under the lexical entry of hao, but rather have acquired the status of a processing unit on their own?

In this study, we hope to have accomplished the following points. First, we hope to have demonstrated that corpus linguistic techniques are very useful in identifying frequency, collocation, and sequential patterns, which are important linguistic facts for understanding the relationship between language use and language structure. Second, we hope to have shown, through the examination of the various ways hao and its neighboring elements are combined, that both “constructions with open-slots” and idiomatic phrasal expressions should receive equal amount of our attention as syntax and lexicon do because they are all modes of linguistic coding who differ from one another only in degrees of conventionalization. Finally, we hope that our case study of hao has illustrated that the syntagmatic association between linguistic elements (typically defined as observable at intra- clauseal level) and their sequential association (typically defined as observable at discourse level) both contribute to grammaticalization and the inception of semantic change in a systematic way. In recognizing the importance of the syntagmatic/sequential relationship between linguistic elements, we are only beginning to understand how discourse patterns may shape linguistic structure.

References

Biq, Yung-O. 2001. The grammaticalization of jiushi and jiushishuo in Mandarin


From collocation to idiomatic expression

University of Michigan Press.


