

# **A corpus-based study of the Chinese synonymous approximatives *shangxia*, *qianhou* and *zuoyou***

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The Chinese antonymous compounds *shangxia* 'up-down', *qianhou* 'front-back' and *zuoyou* 'left-right' can convey similar meanings as approximatives, indicating "about" or "around". This study addresses two questions: 1) To what degree are the three approximatives synonyms? and 2) what are the motivations behind their similarities and differences in actual usage? To investigate the semantic and usage differences between the three approximatives, this study employs the corpus-based behavioral profile (BP) approach (Gries 2010; Divjak and Gries 2006, 2010; Gries and Otani 2010). The data were extracted from the CCL (Centre for Chinese Linguistics) corpus. For statistical analysis, the study performed a hierarchical configural frequency analysis (HCFA) (Gries 2009: 248-252). The corpus analysis yields the following findings. First, the most frequently used of the three approximatives is *zuoyou*, followed by *qianhou* and *shangxia*, in that order. Second, *qianhou* mainly approximates time; *zuoyou* approximates quantity; and *shangxia*, age. Third, in approximating age, time and quantity, the three approximatives exhibit subtle behavioral preferences. Specifically speaking, in approximating time-denoting expressions, *qianhou* tends to modify points in time, *zuoyou* tends to modify time periods, and *shangxia* seldom modifies temporal expressions; In approximating quantity-denoting expressions, *qianhou* does not collocate with quantity-denoting expressions, but *zuoyou* and *shangxia* are used widely; In approximating age-denoting expressions, *zuoyou* and *shangxia* are used much more frequently than *qianhou*.

Based on these corpus findings and conceptual metaphor theory, I address the motivations underlying the similarities and differences between the three synonyms. I argue that their similarities are explained by the metaphor QUANTIFICATION IS SPACE and their behavioral differences are due to the specificity in variations in the metaphor NON-SPATIAL ENTITIES ARE SPATIAL ENTITIES.

## **References**

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