

# The Grammaticalization of Chinese Directional Verb ‘kāi’: A Constructional Approach

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Keywords: Grammaticalization; Constructionalization; Constructional change; Directional verb; Chinese

Grammaticalization was defined by Meillet (1912:131) as “le passage d’un mot autonome au rôle d’élément grammatical”. Prototypically, grammaticalization is expressed by clines as “content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional suffix” (Hopper & Traugott 2003:7).

In Chinese, grammaticalization has long been applied to studies of Chinese grammar since it coincides closely with the proverbial distinction between *shí-cí* (实词, content words) and *xū-cí* (虚词, function words) (Lv 1979; Zhu 1982; Ma 1983). Directional verbs, a closed-class system which can be used either as content words or function words, have attracted much attention (Liu 1998; Liang 2007; Li 2018). This study, as a supplement, adopts a constructionalist approach (Traugott & Trousdale 2013) and explores how Chinese verb ‘kāi’ (开) has transformed from a main lexical verb, as in ‘kāi + Noun’ constructions (meaning ‘open’ or ‘start’), to a directional complement in ‘Verb + kāi’ constructions (meaning ‘away’ or ‘off’).

By retrieving ‘kāi’ in CCL (Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU) corpus, it is found: 1) ‘kāi’ was initially transitive and then took on its intransitive function during Tang dynasty (619-1279); 2) the type frequency and the token frequency of ‘Verb + kāi’ constructions have been progressively increasing throughout the different periods of Chinese; 3) ‘Verb + kāi’ constructions have undertaken both constructionalization and constructional change.

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