

Multiple Paths and Motivations of Language Evolution — —Taking the Lexicalization, Degrammaticalization and Grammaticalization of “Wufang” as an Example

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Keywords: “Wufang”; lexicalization; degrammaticalization; grammaticalization; motivation

Abstract: From a diachronic perspective, “wufang” in Chinese mainly has four usages: verb phrase, adverb, verb, and discourse marker. There is a sequential evolutionary relationship among these four usages. The development of “wufang” — from lexicalization to degrammaticalization and then to grammaticalization — indicates that language evolution features diverse paths. The main motivations and mechanisms behind the evolution of “wufang” include prosodic mechanism, syntactic position, semantic generalization, subjectification, and categorization.

1. Introduction

Language evolution follows diverse paths. Among them, grammaticalization and lexicalization are closely related yet distinct in focus: grammaticalization generally adheres to the principle of unidirectionality, but degrammaticalization also exists. At different evolutionary stages, the specific paths of linguistic phenomena vary, presenting the characteristic of diverse evolution. This paper selects “wufang” as a case study to analyze the possible paths, mechanisms, and motivations of language’s diverse evolution.

In *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (7th Edition, 2012: 1381) and *Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary* (3rd Edition, 2014: 1384), “wufang” has two parts of speech: verb and adverb, defined as “without hindrance; irrelevant” and “might as well” respectively.^{[1] 1381 [2]} A search of linguistic studies on “wufang” in CNKI shows that no scholar has conducted a special case study on it. Due to its similar meaning to “bufang”, we searched for studies related to “bufang” and found that the earliest research on “bufang” was conducted by Yao Xiaopeng and Yao Shuangyun (2009), who argued that “bufang” had undergone a grammaticalization process from a adverbial-head phrase to an adverb and a modal particle.^[3] Peng Xiaochuan (2013) put forward a different view from the above two scholars. She believed that “bufang” at the end of a sentence had not undergone grammaticalization and was not a modal particle. By comparing and analyzing “preposed bufang A” and “postposed bufang B”, and considering that “wufang” has the same meaning as “bufang”, the verb part of speech of “wufang” in dictionaries provides evidence for “bufang”, so “bufang” should be reclassified as a comment verb.^{[4] 490}

Based on the similarity between “wufang” and “bufang” and the lack of special case studies on “wufang”, this paper explores how “wufang” developed from a verb phrase to an adverb, then from an adverb to a verb, and finally from a verb to a discourse marker, as well as the evolution of its meaning and the motivations for its development and evolution. To address these issues, this paper takes “wufang” as the research object, adopts diachronic and synchronic analysis methods, elaborates on the lexicalization, degrammaticalization, and grammaticalization of “wufang”, initially constructs its development trajectory, verifies it with diachronic corpora, and finally discusses the motivations for the lexicalization, degrammaticalization, and grammaticalization of “wufang” in combination with relevant theories.

2. Lexicalization of “Wufang”: From “Wufang₁” to “Wufang₂”

2.1 “Wufang₁”: Verb Phrase

Since the Warring States Period, “wufang” has appeared as a phrase, which was a loose structure at that time. Composed of the negative adverb “wu” modifying the verb “fang”, it was used to express “without hindrance” and was an attributive-head phrase. Therefore, the meaning of the phrase at this time was the simple sum of the meanings of the two monosyllabic words. For example:

(1) Fine wine is served, with jade-like nectar. Return to the old house, respect without hindrance. Dishes are not yet served, while female musicians are arranged. (Qu Yuan, *Chu Ci*, Warring States Period)

(2) To seek a good way to hold an important position, handle major affairs, and enjoy special favor in a powerful state without future troubles, there is no better way than to embrace harmony, promote virtuous people, bestow kindness widely, resolve grievances, and not hinder or harm others. (*Xunzi*, Volume 7)

From the above two examples, it can be seen that the structure “wu + fang” initially appeared as a phrase expressing “without hindrance”, with the expression forms of “wufang + modal particle” or “wufang + NP”. The modal particle here is “xie”, which can be omitted at the end of a sentence, and NP refers to people. As can be seen from Examples (1) and (2), “wu” is used to modify “fang”, indicating a low degree of hindrance, and the core verb is “fang”.

2.2 “Wufang₂”: Adverb

In the Han Dynasty, “wufang” began to transform from a verb phrase usage to an adverb usage. At this period, the usage of “wufang₂” was relatively rare, and the structure gradually became compact from loose. Semantically, it inherited the meaning of “without hindrance” from the previous period, and at the same time derived the meaning of “irrelevant”, which has also been verified in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (7th Edition, 2012) and *Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary* (3rd Edition, 2014).^{[1][2]} Subsequently, since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, such usages of “wufang” as an adverb have gradually increased, and the increase in usage frequency is an important manifestation of the lexicalization of “wufang”. For example:

(3) The envoy said: “If Qin and Zhao unite, the whole world will submit. The reason why I am ordered by Zhao is for Qin. Now that I am sent to Qin but detained by Zhao, there will be a rift between Qin and Zhao. If there is a rift between Qin and Zhao, the whole world will not submit, and Yan will not obey. Moreover, my mission to Qin does not hinder Zhao’s campaign against Yan.” King Zhao thought it was reasonable and sent him away. (*Strategies of the Warring States*, Volume 31)

(4) It is said that the valleys and mountains are deeper than the hills and gardens, yet not making caves allows one to adapt to cold and heat. Although it is a construction, it is not hindered from being

different from the court and market, and so on. (*Book of Song*, Volume 67)

(5) The journey is busy, but it does not hinder pleasant appreciation. The Three Xiangs region is a mysterious area, and Jiuyi Mountain is a scenic spot. (*Complete Prose of the Liang Dynasty*, Volume 22)

(6) Cite the *Records of Fengshan* as evidence; it does not matter if there is indeed a grain named “dao”, for it is not the same as the “dao” used by Sima Xiangru. (*Yan’s Family Instructions*, Volume 6)

(7) The imperial edict replied: “Sages have no doubts and naturally do not understand the mundane truth. However, this does not hinder sages from knowing what ordinary people understand. Therefore, they adapt to the feelings of all things and speak of the Two Truths.” (*Guang Hongming Ji*, Volume 21)

The “wufang + VP” in Example (3) is an adverb usage here. At this time, “wufang” can have two interpretations: one is inheriting the previous meaning of “without hindrance”; the other is expressing the meaning of “irrelevant”. When the envoy of Yan was sent to Qin and detained by Zhao on the way, he reasoned with King Zhao, explaining that his mission to Qin would not hinder Zhao’s campaign against Yan, would not damage Zhao’s interests, and could also be understood as having no connection between the two events. The Han Dynasty was a key period for “wufang” to transition to lexicalization. After the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the usage of “wufang₂” gradually increased, accounting for about half of the total. The “wufang + VP” in Example (4) is an adverb usage: although it is a mountain residence, it is not hindered from being different from the lively court and market and it does not matter that it is different from the lively court and market. The “wufang + VP” in Example (5): one must be diligent when setting off, and there is no hindrance. It does not matter to enjoy the beautiful scenery happily on the way. Example (6) “wufang + VP”: citing what is said in the *Records of Fengshan*, there is no hindrance. It does not matter that there is a grain named “dao”, because it is different from the “dao” used by Sima Xiangru. Example (7) “wufang + VP”: sages have no doubts and naturally do not understand all kinds of mundane truths. But this does not hinder sages from knowing what ordinary people understand; the two are irrelevant. The adverb usage of “wufang₂” is in a transitional period of lexicalization, which lays the foundation for the subsequent evolution of “wufang” into a verb usage.

From the above examples, it can be seen that when the speaker or listener thinks that doing something is “irrelevant”, “wufang” can also derive the meaning of indifference, that is, something has no profound impact on the overall situation.

3. Degrammaticalization of “Wufang”: From “Wufang₂” to “Wufang₃”

In the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, “wufang” was usually located at the end of a sentence and began to be used alone as a verb. At this time, “wufang” began to undergo degrammaticalization, and the transition from adverb to verb was basically formed, expressing “without hindrance”, often used to express views on something. “Wufang” at the end of a sentence usually expresses the speaker’s opinion and attitude. For example:

(8) Coriander can also be planted among green onions, picked and eaten immediately, and even made into pickles in late winter, which is also harmless. (*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*, Volume 3)

(9) It is very delicious when stir-fried. It tastes like water chestnut and gorgon fruit, and eating more is also harmless. (*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*, Volume 5)

The “wufang” in Example (8) is a complete independent structure: coriander can also be planted among green onions, picked and eaten immediately, and making it into pickles in winter is not harmful. The “wufang” in Example (9) also expresses the meaning of “without hindrance”: eating more of this

kind of thing is not harmful to the body. At the same time, the method to judge whether “wufang” is a word or a phrase is as follows: first, according to the syntactic position of “wufang” in the sentence. If the subsequent component is a noun, then “wufang” must exist as a verb phrase, and its part of speech is a verb. If the subsequent component is a verb phrase, then “wufang” gives way to the main verb in the sentence, and its part of speech is an adverb. At this time, “wufang” can be regarded as a modal word used for persuasion. Although the word is superficially negative in meaning, it actually expresses a declarative mood between being optional to do something.

4. Grammaticalization of “Wufang”: From “Wufang₁” to “Wufang₄”

Through the above diachronic examples, we have examined the lexicalization and degrammaticalization of “wufang”. We believe that “wufang” first experienced the evolution from “wufang₁” (verb phrase) to “wufang₂” (adverb), which was a lexicalization evolution. Secondly, the transition from “wufang₂” (adverb) to “wufang₃” (verb) was degrammaticalization. However, the evolution of “wufang” did not end; the evolution from “wufang₃” (verb) to “wufang₄” (discourse marker) is a grammaticalization evolution. Below, we examine the origin of “wufang₄” from a diachronic perspective. The evolution of “wufang₄” is inseparable from “wufang₁” and “wufang₂”. Since the Warring States Period, “wufang₁” has appeared as a verb phrase, where “wu” and “fang” are used together to mean “without hindrance”, belonging to the “wu + X” structure. Its meaning is affected by the morpheme following “wu”, and this structure generally expresses a negative meaning, such as “wufang” in Example (1) above.

In the Han Dynasty, “wufang₂” appeared as an adverb, followed by NP. “Wufang” competed with the main core verb, gave way to the core verb, and was downgraded to an adverb. At this time, the meaning extended to “without hindrance; irrelevant”. For example, in Example (3) above, the core verb is “fa” (campaign); in Example (10), the core verb is “shuo” (speak); in Example (11), the core verb is “gao” (inform). The meaning of “wufang” gradually changed from “without hindrance” under real conditions to “without hindrance” under hypothetical conditions, and extended to the meaning of “persuasion”. The frequency of “wufang” as an adverb gradually increased in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Qing Dynasty, and its meaning as an adverb gradually solidified, with a more compact structure. This indicates that the meaning of “wufang” has gradually grammaticalized at this time, laying the foundation for “wufang” to be further grammaticalized into a discourse marker from a verb. For example:

(10) Nun Zongchi said: “Benefactor Wei, spreading the Dharma to save people is the original vow of my ancestor, but my master teaches through silence. When he speaks, some teachings are explicit, some are implicit, all but a few words or verses, which most people do not understand. Moreover, my master does not speak much, so we speak on behalf of the master; how dare we talk too much? All good believers, if you have any doubts that you do not understand, you might as well speak out, and we will explain them for you.” (Qing Dynasty, *Journey to the East*, Chapter 49)

(11) He hesitated to speak twice, then said: “Our friendship is as close as ours; you may not be surprised if I say it, right? Now that we are about to part, I might as well tell you clearly: I am actually a ghost. I have always loved drinking, got drunk and drowned, and have been here for several years. Previously, the reason why you caught more fish than others was that I secretly drove them to you to repay your libations. Tomorrow, my term will end, and there will be someone to replace me; I am going to be reborn. We can only meet tonight, so I cannot help but feel emotional.” (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Volume 1), Chapter 1)

As a discourse marker, “wufang₄” began to appear independently in the Song Dynasty, serving to connect the context, and has been used to this day. For example:

(12) Han Wei requested the assistance of everyone, but he first asked the ritual officials to discuss

it. It does not matter; let's see what else he has to say. A few days later, Sun Gu's discussion on Emperor Xizu's affairs was presented. (*Facts of the Song Dynasty*, Volume 6)

(13) Someone asked: "Taking the words of various Confucian scholars of recent times as a single learning task, is there any harm?" Zhu Xi replied: "It does not matter. Just see what the main idea is." The person said: "Although what the Confucian scholars said is harmless, Mencius' original meaning has been distorted. Your explanation here is good." (*Classified Conversations of Master Zhu Xi*, Volume 52)

The above two examples have obvious phonetic pauses, are syntactically independent, do not serve as any grammatical component, can be deleted without affecting the grammaticality of the sentence, and their scope covers the entire discourse. The "wufang" in Example (10) expresses Han Wei's view on this matter; deleting it will not affect the truth value of the sentence. Its pragmatic function is equivalent to a connecting component between discourse units, and can be used to indicate Han Wei's emotions, attitudes, positions, and views on this matter, thereby regulating and monitoring the entire discourse. For example, the "wufang" in Example (11) is a response to the preceding discourse, with a certain semantic relationship between the front and back. "Wufang₄" began to appear in oral conversations in the Song Dynasty. Combined with the above examples, it can be seen that "wufang₄" as a discourse marker is usually used in interpersonal conversations, and its pragmatic function has gradually strengthened.

5. The Relationship between Lexicalization, Degrammaticalization and Grammaticalization

Based on the Chinese Corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics Research of Peking University and the National Language Commission's Chinese Corpus, we have counted the occurrence frequency of "Wufang" in various periods, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Frequency Changes of "Wufang"

Period	Warring States	Han	Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties	Sui and Tang	Song	Yuan and Ming	Qing	Republic of China	Modern and Contemporary
Wufang ₁	2	4	3	3	13	9	69	41	44
Wufang ₂	0	1	7	45	14	4	14	9	131
Wufang ₃	0	0	3	24	52	68	206	62	358
Wufang ₄	0	0	0	0	3	13	76	5	24

Frequency changes of "Wufang" in different dynasties can be seen in Table 1. The lexicalization process of "wufang" is "wufang₁" — "wufang₂", followed by the degrammaticalization process of "wufang₂" — "wufang₃", and finally the grammaticalization process of "wufang₃" — "wufang₄". "Wufang₁" first appeared as a loose structure in the Warring States Period; the adverb usage "wufang₂" appeared in the Han Dynasty, and the lexicalization that occurred at this time laid the foundation for the attitude-expressing usage "wufang₃"; in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, "wufang₃" was used as a verb at the end of a sentence; the discourse marker usage "wufang₄" first appeared in the Song Dynasty, and the completion of grammaticalization was obviously later than that of lexicalization.

Through the investigation and analysis of the evolutionary process of the lexicalization, degrammaticalization, and grammaticalization of "wufang", we have further verified the discovery of Li Sixu (2012), who believed that the formation process of most discourse markers is first lexicalization and then grammaticalization. The final transformation of a word into a discourse marker is mainly due to grammaticalization, while lexicalization only plays a role in the early stage.^{[5]335} Therefore, the early lexicalization in the evolutionary path of "wufang" laid the foundation

for its grammaticalization.

It should be noted that the evolutionary process from “wufang₁” to “wufang₂”, then to “wufang₃”, and finally to “wufang₄” is not a process where the latter replaces the former and the former’s usage disappears, but a phenomenon of grammatical coexistence.

6. Motivations for the Lexicalization and Grammaticalization of “Wufang”

As analyzed above, lexicalization and grammaticalization are both distinct and interrelated, and there is no clear boundary between them. Moreover, the occurrence of any linguistic evolution phenomenon is the result of the joint action of multiple factors. The evolution of “wufang” is no exception. Therefore, this paper combines the analysis of its motivations and does not explain them separately.

6.1 Prosodic Mechanism

In the lexicalization process of “wufang”, the prosodic mechanism provides an external formal marker for the formation of Chinese words. Wu Weishan (2003) believed that disyllabization refers to “the tendency to form a basic prosodic unit (foot) with two syllables. Under the action of this prosodic unit, two adjacent monosyllabic words may ‘compound’ into a linguistic unit. The premise of ‘compounding’ is that these two monosyllabic components must ‘co-occur at a high frequency’”.^{[6]8} “Wufang” was originally a verb phrase, with “wu” and “fang” relatively loosely combined; after evolving into a verb, “wu” and “fang” gradually became closely combined. With the high-frequency co-occurrence of “wu” and “fang”, the distance between them has been continuously shortened, the meaning has gradually merged, forming a prosodic word, and finally “wufang₂” was formed. In the verb phrase “wufang”, “wu” is used to modify the action “fang”, and the two are highly relevant, thus making it easier to coalesce, that is, the modifying meaning of “wu” has promoted the lexicalization process of “wufang”.

6.2 Syntactic Position

Yu Jiang (1994) pointed out that “syntactic relations mainly refer to the collocational relations between words and the position of words in sentences.^{[7]105} Changes in the collocational relations between words will cause the grammaticalization of content words”. Song Hongmin (2002) pointed out that “changes in grammatical positions, that is, the influence of new semantic combinatorial relations, is one of the important factors in the grammaticalization of content words”.^{[8]45} Combined with the above analysis, there are three main syntactic positions of “wufang” in the grammaticalization process, with three changes in position. Firstly, “wufang₁” is a consecutive verb phrase composed of the negative adverb “wu” modifying the verb “fang”, which is transitive at this time, and can be followed by an object, which can be a person or a thing, serving as the core predicate in the sentence. Secondly, with the enhancement of transitivity, the structure of “wufang” gradually becomes compact, and the boundary between “wu” and “fang” is gradually eliminated. When followed by a predicative component, it competes with the core predicate, gives way to the core predicate, and “wufang₂” is transformed into an adverb. Its meaning extends to “irrelevant”, and the meaning of surface negation but actual affirmation is gradually highlighted. Finally, “wufang₄” is usually located at the beginning of a sentence as a discourse marker, indicating someone’s position and attitude towards the entire sentence. Shen Jiakuan (1994) pointed out that “grammaticalization usually refers to the process or phenomenon in which words with concrete meanings in language are transformed into components with no concrete meanings and expressing grammatical functions, which is called the grammaticalization of content words in traditional Chinese linguistics”. The

diachronic grammaticalization evolution of “wufang” conforms to this process.^{[9]17}

6.3 Semantic Generalization

Language evolution is closely related to semantic generalization, and the semantic evolution of “wufang” also reflects the characteristics of semantic generalization. Zhu Zhiyong et al. (2022) pointed out that semantic generalization refers to the fact that under the influence of metaphor, analogy, etc., the basic meaning of a word remains relatively stable, but the new semantic and pragmatic space continues to expand, incorporating more meanings, and the referential objects and scope have the characteristics of dynamic development and change.^{[10]75} The original meaning of “wufang” has undergone semantic evolution under the interaction of reality and language internal factors, and its new meaning has produced semantic generalization after being widely used. Under the influence of metaphor, “wufang” has mainly undergone the following evolutions. Metaphor includes a source domain and a target domain: the source domain is equivalent to the noumena of metaphor, which is often a familiar, concrete experiential feeling or thing for people; the target domain is equivalent to the vehicle of metaphor, which is often relatively unfamiliar to people. Metaphor is actually people’s understanding of abstract things with the help of familiar things. In the metaphorical mapping process of “wufang”, the source domain is the state of being without hindrance under real conditions, while the target domain is the state of being without hindrance under hypothetical conditions for people, usually indicating the impact of doing something on something or someone under a hypothetical condition, but this impact is very small and can be ignored. The following is a synchronic analysis, for example:

(14) In the previous program, it was mentioned that Teacher Luo and Teacher Xu Shuwei had a certain telepathic story, but he later said it was not, just an accidental incident. But speaking of accidental stories, is there any harm in sharing it with everyone? (Contemporary, *Liang Dong’s Dialogue with Luo Dalun*)

(15) Lan Pa said: “Master Fang, you’d better wait a few days before leaving; the boat is already full.” Fang Tiansui shook his fan and smiled: “It’s okay for me to squeeze in...” (*The Sea Monster*, Chapter 5)

(16) When Saemon heard this, he hurried and said: “When it comes to the key point, don’t mention me.” “It doesn’t matter to say it!” Kazumasa retorted: “Xiuji not only requires sending the young master immediately, but will also definitely ask the lord to go to Osaka Castle in the name of escorting the young master.” (*The Truce of the Two Heroes*, Chapter 6)

Example (14) assumes that if an accidental story is shared, sharing this matter itself may be without hindrance to the speaker, and at this time it is used to express a euphemistic suggestion. The “wufang” in Example (15) can also be regarded as a verb used for suggestion here; the speaker expresses that although the boat is already full, it is still possible to board by squeezing. The “wufang” in Example (16) indicates Kazumasa’s attitude towards mentioning Saemon when talking about important matters. From the above three examples, it can be seen that if something is harmless to someone, the semantic prosody expressed by the speaker can be regarded as positive.

6.4 Subjectification

Zhang Yisheng (2010) believed: “Overall, the grammaticalization of word meaning is mainly the abstraction of the basic meaning, but sometimes it is also accompanied by the enhancement of subjectification, and the two promote each other”.^{[11]14} Similarly, in the grammaticalization process of “wufang”, subjectification has also played a huge role in promoting it. It is precisely because of the continuous strengthening of modal functions and interpersonal functions that “wufang” was eventually grammaticalized into a discourse marker. Therefore, to a certain extent, it can be said that

the grammaticalization process of “wufang” is also its subjectification process.

In the evolutionary process, “wufang” has successively experienced three different conceptual domains: the domain of action, the domain of knowledge, and the domain of speech. For example:

(17) This shows that these two poetic forms not only can coexist without hindrance, but also one person can be proficient in both. (Cheng Qianfan, Observations from Reading *Collection of Meeting by Chance*)

(18) “Whether she agrees or not actually doesn’t matter...” Huang Xiang shook his head and said: “...As long as Master Chen doesn’t wake up for a day, this matter cannot be resolved.” (*Star Path Lost*, Chapter 4)

The “wufang” in Example (17) means “without hindrance”, which is related to actions that have already occurred, that is, the two poetic forms have already coexisted, belonging to the domain of action. It is the speaker’s statement about the existing state of something, reflecting a propositional meaning and having obvious objectivity; the “wufang” in Example (18) means “irrelevant”, which is a relatively objective judgment made by the speaker on possible actions based on existing experience, belonging to the domain of knowledge. It is a conclusion drawn by the speaker through logical thinking, reflecting a cognitive meaning, but at the same time having a certain subjective color. Compared with Example (17), Example (18) shows that while the speaker utters these words, he also expresses his position and attitude towards the presupposed conditions, and has marked the discourse with a “self” imprint.

The process from the domain of knowledge to the domain of speech is a process of intersubjectification. Shen Jiaxuan (2001) believed that “subjectification refers to the process in which language adopts corresponding structural forms or undergoes corresponding evolutionary processes to express this subjectivity”.^{[12]268} “The difference between these two mechanisms of intersubjectification and subjectification is: subjectification is that meaning becomes more strongly focused on the speaker, while intersubjectification is that meaning becomes more strongly focused on the hearer. But intersubjectification always implies subjectification; there can be no intersubjectification without a certain degree of subjectification (a form cannot have intersubjectification without a certain degree of subjectification). Diachronically, intersubjectification usually appears later than subjectification and derives from subjectification”. At this time, “wufang” is usually an adverb, and carries the meaning of “I think”. For example:

(19) Li Xunhuan said lightly: “It’s okay to have as many enemies as possible, but only one or two friends are enough, because sometimes friends are much more terrifying than enemies.” (*Little Li’s Flying Dagger*, Chapter 18)

(20) That is to say, when we embody the radical critical and innovative spirit with the vigorous vitality of youth, we must remember not to break the strings of life; we might as well leave a little conservatism — to preserve the essence of our traditions and hold fast to the chain of intergenerational connection and continuity! (Liu Xinwu, *Can I Still Pluck Your Heartstrings?*)

Although the “wufang” in the above examples can be omitted in the sentence, including “wufang” makes the tone relatively euphemistic, with a consultative tone, expressing a subjective suggestion of the speaker.

7. Motivations for the Degrammaticalization of “Wufang”

Degrammaticalization is the reverse process of grammaticalization. Grammaticalization is the process of words changing from concrete to abstract, while degrammaticalization is the process of words changing from abstract to concrete. In the evolutionary process, “wufang” has experienced the lexicalization stage from “wufang₁” to “wufang₂”, the degrammaticalization stage from “wufang₂” to “wufang₃”, and finally the grammaticalization stage from “wufang₃” to “wufang₄”, reflecting the

cognitive mechanisms of categorization, decategorization, and recategorization in the process of human understanding of things. Categorization is the process of classifying different things into the same type, or in other words, the conceptualization process in which humans regard different things as the same type. In the evolutionary process from “wufang₁” to “wufang₂”, “wufang₁” was initially a verb phrase used separately, and then after being used consecutively in the sentence, it was combined into the adverb “wufang₂”, which is usually located before the core predicate, and after evolution, it was lexicalized into “wufang₂”. In this process, the looseness of “wufang” gradually disappeared, and its independence gradually increased, while its meaning was basically inherited. Among them, the change in independence enabled “wufang” to transform from the verb phrase category to the adverb category.

In the evolutionary process from “wufang₂” to “wufang₃”, the meaning of “irrelevant” is an important transitional meaning of the adverb “wufang₂”, and from the perspective of meaning and function, it is a degrammaticalization process from abstract to concrete. In the process of evolving into “wufang₃”, “wufang” not only inherited the meaning of “irrelevant”, but also further evolved into a verb located at the end of a sentence — it can be used to express the speaker’s attitude of surface negation but actual affirmation, and also express the meaning of persuasion to a certain extent. This extension and development of meaning and function make the evolution from “wufang₂” to “wufang₃” continuous. At the same time, the strength of the independence of “wufang” once again prompted it to transform from the adverb category to the verb category, realizing decategorization.

In the evolutionary process from “wufang₃” to “wufang₄”, “wufang” transformed from a verb at the end of a sentence to an independently used discourse marker. The degree of independence of “wufang” prompted it to transform from the verb category to the adverb category, realizing recategorization. Each stage involves a reanalysis of the previous stage, and also reflects the continuous update of people’s cognition. It is the continuous deepening of people’s understanding of linguistic phenomena that has promoted the understanding of the objective world they live in.

8. Conclusion

In summary, we have examined the diachronic evolutionary process of the meaning of “wufang”. In modern Chinese, “wufang” mainly has four usages: verb phrase, adverb, independent verb, and discourse marker. These four usages of “wufang” are not isolated from each other; they are closely related, and the situation reflected by diachronic corpora is basically consistent with this. The evolution from “wufang₁” to “wufang₂” is lexicalization, and the prosodic mechanism plays an important role in promoting the lexicalization process; the evolution from “wufang₂” to “wufang₃” is degrammaticalization; the evolution from “wufang₃” to “wufang₄” is grammaticalization, accompanied by subjectification. In this process, for the case study of “wufang”, its lexicalization process is far earlier than the grammaticalization process. Among them, the syntactic position is also one of the important motivations for promoting the semantic evolution of “wufang”, and it is also the result of the continuous expansion of the pragmatic function of “wufang” in the evolutionary process. Through the description of the semantic evolution process of “wufang”, we can see that lexicalization and grammaticalization are closely related in this process. The evolution of any linguistic phenomenon does not happen overnight. Only by combining the research and analysis of diachronic and synchronic corpora, and adopting a dynamic, connected, and developmental perspective to conduct multi-faceted investigations on relevant linguistic phenomena, can we fully reveal many linguistic phenomena and problems that have not been noticed before, and make scientific and reasonable explanations for various complex phenomena in Chinese grammar research.

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