

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

Yung-O Biq  
National Taiwan Normal University

ABSTRACT

Some recent studies concerning language use have shown the significance of frequency/routinization and collocation/metonymy 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, 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 evaluative meaning. We argue that in these evaluative 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 specified 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 a reconsideration of the model for mental grammar.

## 1 Introduction

Some recent studies concerning language use have shown the significance of frequency/routinization and collocation/metonymy 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; Hopper & Traugott, 1993; H. Tao, 2001; L. Tao, 2002; Thompson & Mulac, 1991; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). In response to these interests in the relationship between syntagmatic association and grammaticalization, we would 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 evaluative meaning. We argue that in these evaluative phrases/constructions *hao* has de-categorialized 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 specified 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 it is always discussed in grammar survey books, it is usually not an object for in-depth study. Lu (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, such as *haoxiang* ‘seem, appear’, or *X ye hao, Y ye hao, Z* ‘No matter whether X or Y, (it is always) Z’. 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 its various intra-sentential grammatical functions, 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 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. The array of these meanings/functions is largely unexplored in the literature.

## 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. 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. Inspired by these current trends in linguistics, this paper will examine 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 looking at “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 may display – given the right context. In identifying these inferences or meanings, we draw upon the basic analytical principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 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; H. Tao, 2001), 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., 1998; Stubbs, 2001) in making cross-text-type comparisons.

The focus of this study lies in the co-occurrence patterns and their respective interpretations in casual conversation, which is the type of speech mode that is marked for spontaneity and interactionality. Our database consists of about 15 hours of recordings of naturally occurring Mandarin conversation spoken in Taiwan. Most of the recorded sessions last about 30 minutes and involve two speakers. 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) (See Appendix for gloss conventions). For comparison’s sake, we also consult an online database of contemporary written Chinese in Taiwan, i.e., 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>). Although the database is relatively small, it allows access to the entire text of a token occurrence of the key item, which is important for our purpose here.

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

### 3 *Hao* in interactional 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 present a preliminary check of how *hao* is used in the company of other linguistic elements in spoken, interactional 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 because of truncated speech or false start, etc.

We have found about 1700 tokens of *hao*. This is to exclude tokens of *hao* occurring as part of a word, such as in *haoxiang* ‘seem, appear’. First, as 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* can singly occupy an IU. 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*. After *le*, 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; Lu, 1980). *De*, on the other hand, is one of the most frequently used linguistic elements in Chinese. The collocate, *hao de*, has several functions. In addition to being an expression for assent in interaction, as described 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 work with. We find about 200 tokens of *bu hao*. *Bu* is a negation marker. Its high collocation 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 discussed above 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, their collocation is within expectation and does not interest us as much as the other ones. The next favorite left collocate is the degree adverb *hai* ‘still’; there are about 120 tokens of *hai hao*. Another adverb, *jiu* ‘then’, comes in 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 are much more complicated. Furthermore, we only considered the n+1 and the n-1 positions in the above discussion. Collocational relations do not stop at the distance of one position only each way. However, we think the quick sketch given above has shown us the company 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 they are the most frequent collocates on each side. Our further examination then 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 an evaluative construction

The first set of collocation we want to discuss is *hao* and *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; Liu et al., 1983/1996; Lu, 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.

(1)

- T: 不過妳可以看他怎麼寫的。  
Buguo ni keyi kan ta zeme xie de  
Bu 2S may see 3S how write CLFT
- S: Mhm.
- T: 看他討論了些什麼東西。  
Kan ta taolun le xie shenme dongxi  
See 3S discuss PFT some what thing

-> 好了,

hao le  
HAO LE  
回去再重新想想看。  
huiqui zai chongxin xiang xiang kan  
return again again think think see

T: But you can take a look at how he wrote it.

S: Mhm.

T: See what things he's discussed.

-> **All right.**  
Go home and think about it again.

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 already record HAO LE  
'I have got (it) recorded.'

The third way *hao* and *le* run into each other arises from another canonical use, i.e., 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: CLAUSE/VERBAL SUBJ + *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 condition part while *hao le* constitutes the consequence part. Consider the following examples:

(4)

所以你以後都搭公車就好了。

Suoyi ni yihou dou da gongche jiu hao le

So 2S later all take bus then HAO LE

‘So **it’ll be all set** as long as you take the bus from now on.’

(5)

可是我覺得可以賺錢就好了。

Keshi wo juede keyi zhuanqian jiu hao le

But I feel can make-money then 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)

你們吃完你們先過去就好了。

Nimen chi wan nimen xian guoqu hao le

2P eat finish 2P first go-to 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*” evaluative construction in this paper.

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

SENSE/FUNCTION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Topic transition	11	7.1%



<i>Hao</i> = resultative	13	8.3%
<i>Hao</i> = SV	21	13.5%
Conditional	46	29.5%
Evaluative	65	41.6%
TOTAL	156	100.0%

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

The distribution pattern emerging from our conversational data is quite different from that found in the written data, given in Table 2. In written data, the evaluative construction no longer dominates (10%). Instead, the most frequent types are the “canonical” uses, i.e., the resultative use (40%), the conditional use (25%), and the SV use (20%).

SENSE/FUNCTION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Topic transition	4	5%
<i>Hao</i> = resultative	32	40%
<i>Hao</i> = SV	16	20%
Conditional	20	25%
Evaluative	8	10%
TOTAL	80	100%

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

#### 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 (evaluative) 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 evaluative construction is worthy 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 evaluative use can be a commissive representing the speaker's stance towards what s/he is talking about:

(7)

那我乾脆以後寫 4 就這樣子寫好了。

Na wo gancui yihou xie si jiu zheyangzi xie hao le

Then I might-as-well later write four just this-way write HAO LE

‘So I might as well write “4” like this in the future (and **that’ll do**).’

While the speech act functions may slightly differ from case to case, the evaluative 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 subjective evaluative expressions *wo juede* 'I feel/I think' (10) and *wo kan* 'I see/I think' (11) co-occur because of the subjectivity.

(8)

那[ ]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 (**and that'd be it**).'

(9)

不然[ ]我把外面的窗戶關起來[ ]好了。

Buran wo ba waimian de chuanguhu guan qilai hao le

Otherwise I OBJ outside MOD window close up HAO LE

'Or I can close up the window facing outside (**and that'll do**).'

(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 I'd be better off if I go and make a quick stop.'

(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 evaluative use is that, as the *hao le* part expresses the speaker's evaluative stance (i.e., endorsement), it in fact does not alter the "propositional content" of the utterance if *hao le* is omitted. In other words, (8') conveys essentially the same as (8), and the same applies to all other examples.

(8')

那我明天再打給他。

Na wo mingtian zai da gei ta

Then I tomorrow again call to 3S

‘Then I’ll give him a call tomorrow.’

Of course, there is still some difference. (8') can be uttered by a speaker with a variety of moods. For example, s/he can say this matter-of-factly, or with determination. However, when *hao le* is added, as in (8), it is clear that what is said in the clausal subject is the preferred option with the speaker’s endorsement.

When grammar and discourse are taken into consideration at the same time, this case 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 visible 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 an adverb. This is of course the de-categorialization phenomenon characteristic of grammaticalization (Hopper, 1991), in which the major lexical categories (e.g., noun and verb) shifting towards secondary categories (e.g., preposition). Furthermore, as pointed out above, the evaluative use of *hao le* is only one of the subtypes of how *hao* as a stative verb can be used. The evaluative construction actually requires that the subject be a clause. Other subtypes of *hao le* as the main predicate taking other types of subject are well alive. Thus, we see in the case of *hao le* another characteristic of grammaticalization, layering, i.e., the regular, canonical uses and the newer, grammaticalized uses co-exist with each other.

### 4.3 Summary

To sum up, in Section 4 we distinguished 5 ways that *hao* and *le* can co-occur in terms of the grammatical functions of *hao*. Their distributions in spoken interactional discourse and in 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 an evaluative construction to express the speaker’s commitment (endorsement) to

what is said in the clausal subject. In this construction, *hao le* has decategorized from being a stative verb (plus the perfective marker) into an epistemic adverb expressing stance. It is thus a grammaticalized epistemic construction mostly seen in interactional discourse.

## 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; Lu, 1980; Yeh, 1998).

### 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. Typically, *hai* serves as a sentential adverb, meaning roughly ‘furthermore’ and *hao* serves as an intensifier, meaning roughly ‘very’, to modify the stative verb in the clause. In the following example, *hai* is a sentential adverb 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: 而且還好熱喔.  
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: 還好我沒去，  
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’. It starts 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* or *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: 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。馬馬虎虎。  
Hai hao la mamahuhu  
HAI HAO ITJ so-so

- C: I had an advanced degree in Japanese.  
A: Oh, that means you know it (Japanese) very well.  
-> C: **It’s OK/Well.** So so.

We recognize this particular use as a phrasal type (coded as *hai hao* with a space in between the two words) because it has occurred too 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 *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 *hai hao* is recognized as a phrase rather than just a ADV + SV combination: the majority of the tokens we found in our conversation data occur alone – with no “subject” of the

clause of which *hao* can be said to be the predicate. As such, the phrase typically occupies one intonation unit alone – sometimes with the optional interjection *la/ba/a*, as exemplified in (14). In any case, all of the tokens (with the optional interjection) of the phrasal type are immediately followed by an IU boundary. The first two types of *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 *hai + hao* is prosodically and sequentially clear.

In our spoken database, the phrasal *hai hao* far exceeds the other two types of collocation in terms of frequency.

SENSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
<i>hai</i> (adv) + <i>hao</i> (adv)	9	8%
<i>haihao</i> (compound)	13	12%
<i>hai hao</i> (phrasal)	86	80%
TOTAL	108	100%

TABLE 3. The various senses of *hai+ hao* found in conversational data

On the other hand, our search into the written corpus shows a very different picture about how *hao* is used, which is given in Table 4.

SENSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
<i>hai</i> (adv) + <i>hao</i> (adv)	3	9%
<i>haihao</i> (compound)	21	64%
<i>hai hao</i> (phrasal)	9	27%
TOTAL	33	100%

TABLE 4. The various senses of *hai+ hao* found in written data

The patterns in the spoken data and the written data form an interesting contrast. While in both modes the combination of *hai* and *hao* by the choice principle is the minority, in the written corpus the compound use is the most conspicuous type (64%) but in the spoken corpus the phrasal use dominates (80%).

## 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* are 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 different 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 following example, where speaker B says his classmates' evaluation of a movie is 'so so'. Notice 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: 你同學有人去看呀?

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

-> 還-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 shuo 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-倒還好啦，

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** He-



Nonetheless, many *hai hao* occurrences are used as a euphemism for a negative evaluation. The negative, rather than neutral, interpretation arises from the co-occurrence of *hai hao* and other negative remarks in its immediate neighborhood. In the following example, ‘not really that fun’ immediately follows *hai hao*, rendering a mild negative interpretation of speaker A’s stance towards his trip to a scenic spot.

(16)

B：啊你有去嗎？

A ni you qu ma

ITJ you HAVE go Q

A：我有去啊！

Wo you qu a

I have go ITJ

-> 可是我覺得還好，

keshi wo juede hai hao

but I feel HAI HAO

-> 沒有很好玩，

meiyou hen hao wan

NEG INT good play

就回來了。

Jiu hui lai le

Then return come PFT

B: Did you go?

-> A: Yeah – I did. But I thought it was **OK**. It’s **not really that fun**. So I came back.

### 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, *hai hao* in counter-evaluative turns also displays the interpersonal negotiation in interactional discourse. *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, *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, *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)

-> B: 師大一點特色都沒有.

Shida yidian tese dou meiyou

NTNU a-bit characteristic all NEG

-> A: @ o, ...還好啦,

O hai hao la

ITJ HAI HAO ITJ

它中間,

ta zhongjian

it middle

..中間那樣樓梯那樣旋轉上去還是有一點點

Zhongjian nayang louti nayang xuanzhuang shangqu hai shi you yi diandian

Middle that-way stairs that-way curve up still be have one bit

特色.

tese

characteristic

-> B: **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.

Taida shi zhende hao da o

NTU be really INT big ITJ

-> A: ...還好, ...習慣了.

Hai hao xiguan le

HAI HAO accustomed PFT

-> B: **The NTU campus is really big.**

-> A: **Well (not really that big).** ... I'm used to it.

Second, when the object 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 compulsive cleaning 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。

Wo keneng you jiepi wo zai xiang

I probably have clean-compulsion I ING think

B: 你有潔癖?

Ni you jiepi

You have clean-compulsion

A: 有一點點，跟我媽一樣。

You yi dian dian ge wo ma yiyang

Have one bit bit with my mother same

-> B: 還好啦。

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 compulsive cleaning (disorder),** I think.

B: You have compulsive cleaning (disorder)?

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 object 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。馬馬虎虎。  
Hai hao la mamahuhu  
HAI HAO ITJ so-so
- C: I 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: 還好，  
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

- > 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’. Given the yes-no question, the interlocutor 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 a truth-condition answer, *hai hao* is used as a hedge – expressing ‘nothing remarkable’ – that indirectly conveys negation.

(22)

- A: eh 那你們，  
Eh na niman  
ITJ then 2P  
-> 班上啊有沒有發生一些比較有趣的事情啊？  
Banshang a youmeiyou fasheng yixie bijiao youqu de shiqing a  
Class ITJ HAVE-NEG-HAVE happen some relatively interesting MOD  
thing ITJ  
B: 我們班喔，  
Women ban o  
Our class ITJ  
-> 其實還好耶，  
qishi hai hao ye

actually HAI HAO ITJ  
 大家就可能是剛那個認識的啊，  
 dajie jiu keneng shi gang nage renshi de a  
 everyone just probably be just-now that get-to-know CLFT ITJ  
 所以沒有幾天吧，  
 suoyi meiyou ji tian ba  
 so NEG several day ITJ  
 所以都不太熟啊，  
 suoyi dou bu tai shou a  
 so all NEG INT familiar ITJ  
 就好像也沒有比較活潑的，  
 jiu hoaxing ye meiyou bijiao huopo de  
 just seem also NEG relatively outgoing MOD  
 可是可能以後知道吧，  
 keshi keneng yihou zhidao ba  
 but probably later know ITJ  
 現在還不知道，  
 xianzai hai bu zhidao  
 now still NEG know  
 這樣子。  
 Zheyangzi  
 This-way

-> A: So are there anything **interesting** happening in your class?

-> B: Our class? **Well actually so so (i.e., nothing that I've noticed).** 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: 那你們兩個現在有在一起唸書嗎？  
Na nimen liangge xianzai you yiqi nian shu ma  
Then 2P two-M now have together study book Q

A: 唸書哦，  
Nian shu o  
Study book ITJ  
一起，em，  
yiqi em  
together ITJ

-> 還好，  
hai hao  
HAI HAO  
沒有 a.  
meiyou a  
NEG ITJ

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 Section 5 we distinguished 3 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 written discourse 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/neutral. 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 here are, in a nutshell,

(1) from low positive/neutral to mild negative, (2) from neutral to unremarkable, and (3) from unremarkable to negation. Just like the “CLAUSAL 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 our case, the adverb *hai* and the stative verb *hao* have turned into a 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 syntagmatic (metonymic) association, which often triggers semantic change to the lexical items involved in the collocation (Thompson & Mulac, 1991; Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine 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 so in written discourse). There is a good reason for their relative high frequency in spoken discourse: these two patterns have been used to express evaluation and to negotiate views and values, both being common activities speakers engage themselves in doing in interactional discourse. As *hao* shifts from being 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 high frequency, have become stabilized constructional or phrasal units.

It is interesting to note that when asked, ‘What is the meaning of *hao*?’ native speakers will always reply with the “canonical” senses (e.g., ‘good’, etc.), although our spoken data have shown that the occurrence rate of these senses are not as high as those of the evaluative senses. This points to the fact 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 “constructions with open-slots” and idiomatic phrasal expressions should receive equal amount of our attention as syntax and lexicon do because they are all products of various linguistic coding strategies, only that these strategies differ from one another 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 at the intra-clausal level, and their sequential association at the 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.

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#### **APPENDIX – Gloss conventions for grammatical roles**

2P	second person plural	2S	second person singular
3S	third person singular	ADV	adverbial marker
CLFT	<i>shi...de</i> cleft construction	ING	progressive
INT	intensifier	ITJ	interjection
M	measure word	MOD	modification relation
NEG	negation	OBJ	preposed-object marker
PFT	perfective marker	Q	question marker