Headedness and constructions in Mandarin prefixed words

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The aim of this talk is to analyse and discuss the nature and features of some prefix-like word constituents in Mandarin, such as 非 *fēi* 'non' (非暴力 *fēibàolì* 'nonviolence') or 高 *gāo* 'tall, high' (高蛋白 *gāodànbái* 'high protein'), in order to deepen the understanding of Chinese morphology and to contribute to a cross-linguistically valid characterization of prefixation.

As illustrated in Montermini (2008: 13 ff.), in the Western linguistic tradition for a long time prefixing was regarded as a special kind of compounding, and suffixes only were assigned to derivation; prefixes have been regarded as "a doubly 'marginal' phenomenon, (…) the special case of a bigger phenomenon" (Montermini 2008:9). Also, since the formulation of the "Righthand Head Rule" by Williams (1981), it has been believed that suffixes only could determine the lexical category of the whole word (although some counter-examples were "allowed"). This distinction in terms of categorizing force, which makes prefixes somehow "weaker" than suffixes, has been challenged, among others, by Corbin (1999) and Montermini (see the discussion in Montermini 2008: 185 ff.): class changing prefixation is well documented in many languages, as e.g. in the Afro-Asiatic and Austronesian family (Montermini 2008:211).

In this talk, historical data on Mandarin prefixes or, rather, "prefix-like" morphemes will be presented; such data will come mainly from dictionaries and from the Academia Sinica corpora. Chinese apparently possesses a small number of class preserving affixes as 非- *fēi-*, 老- *lǎo-* and 小- *xiǎo-*, which also seem to be among the oldest attested in the language. Another class of prefixes, most likely larger than the first one, is that including 多- *duō-*, 零- *líng-* and 高- *gāo-*, often regarded as prefixoids in the literature (see Pan, Yip & Han 2004, among others), which most of the times are attached to a noun and build a non-predicative adjective, although with exceptions; as adjectives are claimed to be parametrically right-headed in Chinese (cf. Ceccagno & Scalise 2006, Ceccagno & Basciano 2007), these morphemes could be analysed as instances of class-changing prefixation patterns.

We shall propose a constructional treatment for such a phenomenon (Booij 2005, 2007); in a Construction Morphology framework, "[w]ord formation patterns can be seen as abstract schemas that generalize over sets of existing complex words with a systematic correlation between form and meaning" (Booij 2007:34). A constructional scheme as

[*duō* [X]N]ADJ 'having many X' → [*duō* [*mínzú*]N]ADJ 'multi-national'

contains all the relevant information in terms of word-class restrictions of the operands and, also, the part of speech tag of the output. The prefix represents the fixed slot and the meaning belongs, in a sense, to the construction itself. Also, we shall deal with some residual problems with this treatment, concerning the nature of non-predicative adjectives and the boundaries of such category with nouns and predicative adjectives (Zhang 1994, Deng, Wang & Li 1996).

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