This paper aims to delve into the developmental path of two volition verbs and to show that movements of V-to-I and I-to-C/V-to-C have been diachronically occurring in two dialects/languages that are often categorized under the same generic term Chinese. The two volition verbs involve beh “to want” in Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM) and yao “to want” in Mandarin Chinese. In investigating diachronic data of classical Chinese, we will show these two verbs have been undergoing a process of categorical change and resulting in polysemy in the synchronic dimension. Both beh and yao can behave like a main verb, a modal auxiliary (expressing obligation and desire), a future marker, and a conditional marker. Since beh in Southern Min has evolved almost identical functions with those of yao in Mandarin by the 16th century, it is not plausible to assume that the Southern Min beh derives phonologically or semantically from the Mandarin yao or even from a literary form yu “to want” (cf. Tung, 1998). In fact, the literary yu can only function as a main verb or a future marker. Thus, this study will show that two etymologically unrelated forms, beh and yao, have displayed an almost identical path of change, and that this change can be well explained by a syntactic verb-movement occurring in a diachronic dimension.

Diachronic reanalysis or grammaticalization has often been attributed to this type of development. However, we will suggest that the verb movement be the direct measure that makes the diachronic reanalysis possible. In fact, studies of grammaticalization in the past two decades have seen an increasing number of analyses for the evolutionary process of a lexeme into a grammatical morpheme (e.g. Heine et al. 1991; Hopper & Traugott 1993; Bybee et al. 1994). Two recent studies on the semantic development for Chinese volition verbs include Chang’s (1996) investigation for beh in TSM and Cheng’s (2001) Mandarin yao. This study therefore draws upon findings in semantic analysis to suggest that verb movement exist in Chinese, although it exemplifies itself differently from the overt verb movement in languages like French.

Comparing the auxiliary system in English and French, Roberts (1993a, 1993b) proposes a sub-node Agr¹ in the Agreement to host inflectional features in languages with rich morphology. An implication emerges from Roberts’s discussion is that if a language has null subjects, then it has V-to-Agr movement. Several studies (cf. Huang 1994, Tsai 1994) have proposed that, synchronically, any overt movement of verb to a functional category is nonexistent in Chinese, based on the evidence that the language, contrary to other languages like English, French, etc., lacks functional projection of Agreement Phrase. Huang (1989), examining the null pronominal of both finite and infinitive sentences in Mandarin Chinese,
proposed a generalized control theory in accounting for the null subject phenomenon. In Huang’s analysis, Chinese is considered a pro-drop language despite the fact that it does not have overt morphological features. If this is the case, based on the implication in Roberts (1993a, 1993b) and the proposal in Huang (1989), we should expect that overt verb movement to functional category exists in Chinese.

Following from Roberts’ (1998) proposal that movement is “overt Move F”, we will argue that the Chinese volition verbs, in addition to the theta-role assigning features, carry formal weak features associated with modal auxiliaries, future and conditional markers. Checking the weak features, which are stripped away from the V, causes the verb to move. In this way, the verbs overtly move to the higher I and C positions. The analysis therefore assumes that the weak features with the Chinese volition verbs are checked prior to Spell-Out.

References


