

Exploring the emergence of the postverbal

*sin*¹ 先 in Cantonese

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*Sin*¹ 先 as a function word in contemporary Cantonese encodes a number of grammatical and pragmatic meanings. As its most prominent feature in syntax, it predominantly occurs in the postverbal position while indicating the meaning of ‘first’. This paper explores the emergence of the postverbal *sin*¹ 先 ‘first’ in Cantonese. We first examine the word order typology on the element for ‘first’ in the languages and dialects of southern coastal China. In this linguistic area, the postverbal elements for ‘first’ in Chinese dialects are contact-induced by Tai-Kadai and Hmong-Mien languages; whereas *sin*¹ 先 ‘first’ in the mainstream Cantonese shows a stronger tendency to be placed in the postverbal position than its counterparts in other Chinese dialects. We then discuss the word order and semantic changes of *sin*¹ 先 from 1820s to 1960s based on Cantonese historical materials. Besides the pressure of language contact, the formation of the postverbal *sin*¹ 先 ‘first’ has been further triggered by the semantic motivation to formally differentiate the ‘precedent-subsequent’ polysemy within *sin*¹ itself. In short, the emergence of the postverbal *sin*¹ 先 ‘first’ in Cantonese has been a two-stage process, dually driven by external and internal causes, respectively.

Keywords: Cantonese, *sin*¹/*xiān* 先, areal linguistics, language contact, word order change, semantic change