Contact and Change in the History of the Chinese Language

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This article is a preliminary examination of whether language contact has influenced Chinese language development, and if so, which other languages might have been of relevance. Special attention is given to the period between the third and ninth centuries when large volumes of Buddhist sutras were translated from Sanskrit or Pali into Chinese. During the past few decades, a significant body of literature has been published on the subject of language contact and its influence on language change, but it deals mainly with synchronic studies of language contact and rarely or scarcely touches upon modern Chinese, much less Chinese language development. Chinese linguists long held the view that language change in Chinese has been due only to internal factors. However, external borrowing through language contact could play a crucial role in understanding Chinese language changes, especially given the fact that China has had large-scale language contact with non-Han peoples such as Central Asian monks, Mongols, Manchus, and so on. This study employs data collected from a large volume of documents and texts from three periods in Chinese history: the Medieval Period (3rd-7th c.), the Yuan dynasty (late 13th - early 14th c.) and the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). We isolate and examine specific linguistic features in the documents and texts representative of various time periods, and we discuss the social and historical conditions which gave rise to certain changes as a result of contact with non-Chinese languages, the mechanisms by which these linguistic features emerged in Chinese as well as the nature of the language that was influenced by non-Chinese languages and how it developed over time.

Key words: language contact, Chinese language development, translated Buddhist sutras

1. Introduction

One of the major questions in the study of grammatical development concerns the underlying mechanisms responsible for change — are they due to analogy and reanalysis (including grammaticalization), or are they caused by external factors such as borrowing or interference? Since the 1980s, linguists have increasingly turned to external factors such as language contact and borrowing as underlying forces that can motivate a language
to evolve. Important studies include Thomason & Kaufman (1988) on creolization and pidginization of languages, Harris & Campbell (1995) on historical linguistics, and more recently the work of Heine & Kuteva (2005) on the effect of language contact on grammatical structure. During the past few years, however, scholars have increasingly come to realize that external factors might have played a part in the development of the Chinese language.

This article is a preliminary examination of whether language contact has influenced Chinese language development, and if so, which other languages might have been of relevance. Special attention is given to the period between the third and ninth centuries when large volumes of Buddhist sutras were translated from Sanskrit or Pali into Chinese.

1.1 Language contact in the history of Chinese language

Throughout Chinese history, a number of non-Chinese (or non-Han) ethnic groups with languages belonging to various language families have resided in or occupied the northern Chinese territories. Two groups occupied all of China for significant periods of time. The following is a brief account of the major non-Han groups:¹

- Xiongnu: a Turkish-speaking group, founded the first steppe empire in the third century BC on the grasslands of northern China and were conquered by the Han in the first century BC and first century AD.
- Rouzhi: probably an Indo-European-speaking group, sought by Han China as allies against the Xiongnu in the second century BC.
- Xianbei: a Mongolian-speaking group of people who resided in eastern Mongolia in the third century AD and invaded China in the fourth century.
- Töbgach (Tuoba): largely Mongolian language speakers, founded the Northern Wei dynasty (AD 386-534) in North China.
- Turks (Tujue): a Turkish-speaking group who established an empire in China circa AD 581.
- Khitan (Qidan): a Mongolian-speaking group, founded the Liao dynasty in North China and adjacent areas, which ruled from AD 947 to 1125.
- Jurchen (ancestors of Manchus): a Tungusic language group, founded the Jin dynasty, which ruled North China from AD 1122 to 1234.
- Tanguts: a Tibetan-speaking group, founded the Xixia Kingdom in Northwest China, which lasted from AD 1038 to 1227.

¹ This brief account of the major non-Han groups is primarily based on Fairbank’s list (1978:153), with minor revisions.
• Mongols: a Mongolian-speaking group, founded the Yuan dynasty and ruled over all of China from AD 1271 to 1368.
• Manchus: a Manchu-speaking group, founded the Qing dynasty and occupied all of China from AD 1644 to 1911.

Of the non-Han ethnic groups described above, the Khitan, Jurchen and Tanguts occupied areas in the north or northwest of China, while the Mongols and Manchus took over the entire country for 97 years and 267 years, respectively. This prolonged period of foreign contact resulted in extensive cultural convergences and exchanges with these peoples. Further, many integral aspects of Chinese culture (e.g., art, dance and music) emerged under the influence of non-Han cultures. Considering such a context, repeated large-scale linguistic contact throughout the history of China was inevitable, especially given the fact that Mongolian was the official language during the reign of the Yuan dynasty and Manchu was one of the official languages in the imperial court during the Qing dynasty.

However, the most significant and major influence on China in the areas of philosophy, religion, literature, architecture and language did not come from non-Han conquerors such as Mongols and Manchus but through the spread of Buddhism in China during the period from the first to the sixth centuries. This is regarded as one of the major events of Chinese cultural history and the single most important foreign influence on Chinese civilization before the impact of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While contact under Mongol control and under the Manchu regime mark two of the three major language contacts in Chinese history, the Buddhist contact signifies the first and probably the most important language contact to influence the syntactic development of the Chinese language.

1.2 Contact through Buddhist works during the Medieval Period (3rd-7th c.)

Buddhist ideologies were imported into China primarily through the large-scale translation of Buddhist sutras from Sanskrit, Pali, or certain Central Asian languages into Chinese. Between the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and the Tang dynasty (AD 618-960), a vast number of Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese. The first documented translation of Buddhist sutras into Chinese dates from AD 148 as An Shigao, the Parthian prince-missionary, arrived at the Han Dynasty capital of Luoyang, where he set up a center for the translation of Buddhist texts. Kushan Lokaksema, Kumārajīva and several others were the main translators after An Shigao and none of them were native speakers of Chinese. From the late Han to the end of the Tang dynasty, over 170
translators were involved in the translation of 2,278 Buddhist sutras from Sanskrit or Pali into Chinese. Within these translated sutras, there are 7,046 ‘fascicles’ containing approximately 56 million characters.2

2. The nature of the contact

Of the three major language contacts introduced above, the Central Asian monks traveled to China in order to spread Buddhist teachings, while the Mongols and Manchus did so in order to control the land and its people. Their motivations varied, but all three groups underwent some process of learning the Chinese language. In the written texts left by these groups of non-native Chinese speakers, there appear certain special, unauthentic linguistic elements or features that had not previously existed in Chinese. These are the results of imperfect Chinese language learning due to interference from the foreigners’ mother tongue. The Chinese these people used was essentially an intermediary language, or interlanguage.

2.1 The interlanguage in the translated Chinese Buddhist texts

It is widely accepted that the translated sutras or texts stimulated the production of a new Chinese lexicon. Yet understanding the extent to which these non-Chinese elements led to changes in Chinese syntax requires the careful study of the elements and features borrowed from the original Sanskrit as well as the interlanguage errors of the translators. We will return to this point with more discussion in §3 and §4 below.

2.2 The interlanguage in Yuan baihua

In order to foster communication with the Chinese, the Mongols used a mixture of Chinese and Mongolian known as Yuan baihua, or “Mongolian Chinese”. While some linguists consider this language a pidgin or creole (see Zu 2005, 2007), it actually is more like an interlanguage (see Cao & Chen 2009). The following are two examples:3

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2 Taisho Tripitaka Vol. T55, No. 2154.
3 These two examples are taken from the paper “The Mongol empire in China and the Mongolian influence on Chinese language” presented by Cao Guangshun in the Steppes and their suburbs workshop in France in 2007.
(1) 賚把行的聖旨與了也。
lai  ba  xing  de  shengzhi  yu-liao-ye.
hold  hold  carry.out  de  imperial.edicts  give-PERF-FP
‘(The emperor) gave the imperial edict [to the monk] for him to carry out.’

(2) 五嶽、五鎮、四海、四瀆咱每的神祈有。
wuyue,  wuzhen,  sihai,  sidu,  zanmei-de  shen  qi-you.
five.mounts  five.areas  four.seas  four-lakes  our  god-LIG  pray-AP
‘[You, the Taoist practitioners go to] worship the gods of ours [who are in
charge of] the Five Mountains, Five Areas, Four Seas and the Four Lakes.’

In both examples, the text is written in Chinese characters and the words are
Chinese, but the syntactic structure is typical of Yuan baihua; the Mongols had always
refused to learn the Chinese language. Perhaps due to the fact that the Mongols did not
rule over China for a very long time, Yuan baihua became extinct very soon after the
Mongols lost their power over the Chinese.

2.3 Manchu, interlanguage and sinicization

The Manchus occupied China for almost 300 years. Although both Manchu and
Chinese were official languages of the imperial court, there was a significant shift
among the Manchus from being monolingual Manchu speakers (before the 1660s) to
bilingual Manchu and Chinese speakers (1660s-1790s) and then to monolingual Chinese
speakers (after the 1790s). During the transitional period, a form of interlanguage was
used in that the written script and words were Chinese but the word order was Manchu.
The Compilation of the Qing Language (Qingwen huishu 清文匯書), a well-known
Manchu-Chinese dictionary compiled under the Yongzheng reign (1722-1735), has the
following Chinese character equivalents for Manchu expressions:

(3) Generengge akū
go-NOM  meiyou
‘No one went.’

The following abbreviations are used in the examples: AP assertive particle; FP sentence final
particle; LIG ligature marker; NEG negation; NOM nominalizer; and PERF perfective aspect.
(4) Ebubumbi
凡從高處使人諸物往下下
fan cong gaochu shi ren zhuwu wangxia xia
all from high.place make people things towards.downward move
‘As long as ordering people to move things down from a high place...’

Though Chinese is a subject-verb-object language, both of these examples consist of Chinese characters and lexical items in the object-verb word order of Manchu. According to the Qing document *Records of the Eight Banners* (*Baqi wenjin 八旗文經*), before and after the bannermen went into Beijing, “All the Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese armies [knew how to] speak the national language (Manchu)... A hundred years later, not everyone [could] speak the national language (Manchu).” When the Manchus first took over the northeast of China in the 1620s, the Manchu national founder Huang Taiji (1559-1626), also known as Nurhaci, created an official position known as “Qixinlang” (啓心郎 literally ‘clerk who clarifies thoughts’, meaning ‘interpreter’). Each official bureau had a “Qixinlang” to facilitate communication between the Manchus and the Chinese. However, this position had already become superfluous in 1672 when it was abolished by Emperor Kangxi due to the large number of Manchus who had become bilingual within this 56-year period. The number of Manchu speakers continued to decline from then on. Official Qing historiographical accounts record that in 1776, the fortieth year of the Qianlong reign, the emperor was shocked and infuriated by the fact that his Manchu subordinates could not speak their mother tongue, the decline of the Manchu language was inexorable by this point. During the Guangxu reign (1875-1908), “all of [the Manchus] follow[ed] the Han customs in speaking and writing,” and “there were only one or two out of a thousand Manchus” who could speak the Manchu language (*Hulanfu zhi*, vol. 10). Official documents before 1840 contained both Manchu and Chinese, placed side by side. After 1840, however, documents were written only in Chinese. Even the most powerful woman in the history of the Qing dynasty, the Empress Dowager, knew no Manchu whatsoever.

3. Externally induced influence on the Chinese language—taking examples from Chinese sutras translated during the Medieval Period

There are distinctive linguistic differences between the language in the Chinese sutras translated during the Medieval Period and that in native Chinese texts of the same

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period. These differences fall under two categories: the emergence of unusual, innovative features in Chinese and pre-existing Chinese features used with excessive frequency in translated Buddhist texts.

3.1 Examples of distinctive linguistic features in the language of translated Chinese sutras

(a) The postverbal yi 已 denoting completed action:

The translated Buddhist texts contain many examples of the “V (O) + yi” construction. In pre-Qin times and the former Han dynasty, the verb in this construction could only be a continuous verb (chixu dongci 持續動詞, e.g., shi 食 ‘to eat’), such as shi yi 食已 ‘have eaten.’ In cases where an instantaneous verb is used (shunjian dongci 瞬間動詞, e.g., si 死 ‘to die’), to indicate that something had come to an end involved placing yi before the verb, such as yi si 已死 ‘[already] died’. However this verbal constraint is not respected in the translated sutras. The translators used both types of verbs in the “V (O) + yi” construction without recognizing the fact that placing this second type of verb in the pre-existing Chinese construction violates a grammatical rule. This error is a form of interlanguage caused by the lack of such a distinction between the two types of verbs in the language of the translators. This new form of “V (O) + yi” construction is frequently found in the Buddhist sutras. The “mistake” of using yi with an instantaneous verb (yi later developed to liao > lei) is an innovation resulting from language contact and the influence of Sanskrit\(^6\) on Chinese.

(b) The copular construction—“subject, noun shi” construction:

This type of copular construction in which a verb is placed in the final position of a sentence is most likely the influence of Sanskrit (see Jiang 2003 and Chen 2003).

(c) The special usage of the interrogative word yunhe 云何:

*Yunhe*, meaning ‘what’, has only one function in traditional Chinese texts: to serve as an interrogative word in a question. This interrogative word is used in Chinese sutras as a translation for the Sanskrit word *kim* ‘what’. In our previous studies (Yu 2003 and 2007), we compared the language in translated Chinese sutras with the language in corresponding Sanskrit texts and found that placing *yunhe* in a superfluous or redundant position at the beginning of a sentence in the translated sutras without it having any function as an interrogative is due to the Sanskrit influence.

\(^{6}\) Qiantan ‘Qiren bai wang, fu yi si liao’—Jianlun yuyan jiechu yingxiang Hanyu yufa fazhan de jizhong moshi, paper presented in Guizhou, 2006.
(d) The cause marker gu 故 used at the end of sentences:

Standard Chinese texts from the Medieval Period place gu in the beginning of the second clause, “…, gu…”. In the translated sutras however, gu is placed at the end of the sentence, “…, … gu”. This post-positioned gu is the result of the Sanskrit influence (see Wang 2004, Yu 2007, 2008).

(e) The disposal construction “qu OV” (取 OV):

Chinese is an SVO language. The verbal final word order is very likely to be influenced by the word order of Sanskrit (see Cao & Yu 2000a, 2000b).

(f) The genitive marker suo/xu (所/許):

The usage of suo/xu in the Chinese translated sutras probably corresponds to the genitive case in Sanskrit (see Zhao 2009).

(g) Number:

In Classical Chinese, the words deng (等), bei (輩) and cao (曹) have various functions. One of which, when placed after a personal noun or personal pronoun, is to denote that ‘there is more than one’ (e.g., wubei ‘we’). In Sanskrit, however, numeration is quite complicated. There are singulars, duals, and plurals for nouns, pronouns and adjectives, and linguists have pointed out that, in many cases, the expanded use of deng and cao used as plural markers in Chinese sutras is due to Sanskrit influence (see Zhu 1992).

(h) Passive construction:

It has been widely acknowledged among scholars that the frequency of passive constructions in the Chinese of translated Buddhist sutras is noticeably higher than that in Chinese texts of the Medieval Period (see, for example, Wu Jinhua 1983 and Zhu Qingzhi 1993). The passive construction in Chinese, as in many East Asian languages such as Japanese, Vietnamese, and Thai, primarily denotes adversity. The use of the passive voice in Sanskrit is different. It can be used in sentences with transitive verbs, as in English. It can also be used in the so-called “impersonal construction,” where the verb can be intransitive. It is apparent that Sanskrit has a strong preference for the use of passive sentences in Sanskrit scripture. This may explain why there is a significantly higher frequency of passive sentences in the Chinese sutras.

3.2 Two axes in the language of translated Chinese Buddhist sutras

All of the above examples mark the different linguistic features in the language of
Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras. These distinctive phenomena can be observed on two axes:

i. Synchronically, or on a “horizontal” differential axis, (i) there are special/unusual and new linguistic features that emerged in the language of Chinese-translated Buddhist sutras (zero > innovative features). Examples (a) through (f) above belong to this group. (ii) Certain linguistic elements have a much higher frequency of use in the translated sutras than in the Chinese texts (few > more). Examples (g) and (h) above are of this type. All of these linguistic phenomena are associated with the Buddhist influence via language contact regardless of whether it is a new feature or preexisting feature of high frequency.

ii. Diachronically, or on a “vertical” evolutionary axis, while all of the aforementioned features appear in translated Chinese sutras, not all of them were accepted into the Chinese language system and used in standard Chinese works. Only a very few of them were accepted and triggered grammatical changes in Chinese.

3.3 Borrowing vs. interference

In our previous studies (Yu & Cao 2007), in examining the relationship between the distinctive linguistic phenomena found in the language of translated Chinese sutras, compared with that of their corresponding Sanskrit sutras, we divided the new phenomena found in the translated sutras into two categories: borrowing and interference. In the former category, linguistic elements of the original Sanskrit language were directly borrowed (i.e., transferred or copied) into Chinese. Yunhe, for example, is a typical case where the translators simply took the literal translation as well as the initial sentence position of kim ‘what’ and copied it into Chinese. As a result, the Chinese interrogative word yunhe ‘what’ is found appearing at the beginning of a sentence in translated Chinese sutras without having the function of an interrogative. The “V (O) + yi” construction is an example of interference. There was a clear grammatical rule in Chinese regarding the use of yi indicating the completion of an action but Sanskrit does not have such grammatical constraints. The error of not differentiating between the different syntactic behaviors of the two groups of verbs (continuous verbs vs. instantaneous verbs) when using yi is due to interference from the translators’ language: Sanskrit. We will come back to this point in the next section.

Borrowing and interference are two separate types of influence on the Chinese language; borrowing refers to linguistic features of other languages that are superimposed onto Chinese while interference involves changes in grammatical development induced
by other languages. The linguistic result of the two types of influence in language contact is different in Chinese. To our knowledge, to date only interference has had an impact on Chinese syntactic development.

4. Language contact and the development of the Chinese language

As mentioned above, language contact is a mechanism of language change, and throughout the history of Chinese language development, one question of major interest has always been whether or not Chinese has been influenced by this phenomenon. If there has been such an external influence, the question now is how it has impacted upon the Chinese language.

First of all, we must define the word ‘influence’. If we take the broad sense of the word, then whenever ungrammatical features in Chinese arise as the result of external contact, we may say that Chinese has been influenced by another language. However, this kind of influence is limited in scope. Ungrammatical elements might only appear within certain genres (e.g., Buddhist scriptures or Buddhist literature), and they may only remain for a short period of time. On the other hand, in the narrow sense of the word, influence causes changes in the development of the Chinese language. These changes spread throughout the Chinese language, they are accepted into the Chinese language and finally are incorporated as parts of the Chinese language system. The latter type of influence is an external mechanism that induces the development of the Chinese language.

4.1 The broad sense of influence of language contact

In the broad sense of influence of language contact, we could count every single ungrammatical linguistic element associated with foreign contact that has ever appeared in any Chinese written text throughout Chinese history. In doing so, then we would find that there are a lot of non-Chinese elements that appear in Chinese writings in various periods of Chinese history. Aside from the examples of the translations of Buddhist sutras given above, there are a number of other examples that can be seen in Yuan baihua as well, such as the SOV word order, the post-positioned object case marker gendi 根底, the suffix encoding causative shang 上 shangtou 上頭, the plural marker mei 每, the particle indicating direct quotation modao 謂道, and so on.

Even though there are many such distinctively unusual phenomena that can be found in writings, they are limited to certain documents or texts from certain time periods. They were not widespread, nor were they accepted into the Chinese language system, and they have never broadly appeared in the written language of the Chinese people.
For example, the sentence final cause marker *gu*, as examined in our previous study (Yu 2008), first appeared in sutras translated by Central Asian monks during the Medieval Period. It continued to be used in Buddhist sutras translated by Chinese monks during the Tang dynasty, and was later also found to have been used in Buddhist writings by Chinese around the ninth through eleventh centuries, including in *Excerpts of Recorded Sayings of the Zen Sect* (*Chanzong yulu*, 禪宗語錄). Yet from beginning to end, the sentence final *gu* only appeared in Buddhist writings and was used only within the limit of that particular religious domain. Similar situations are found with *Yuan baihua*. Cao Guangshun & Chen Dandan (2009) pointed out that many of these special linguistic phenomena only appear in documents or texts relating to the Mongols and these unusual or ungrammatical features fell out of use shortly after the Mongols lost their power to the Chinese.

4.2 The narrow sense of influence of language contact

The narrow sense of language contact influence refers to those unusual linguistic elements that have made an impact on Chinese language development. Based on what we know, very few grammatical changes in Chinese have been triggered by language contact. Studies have shown that the two best known cases of Buddhist influence on the Chinese language are the following: the postverbal *yi* denoting the completion of an action in the “*V (O) + yi*” construction and the disposal construction. In the following, we will take the *yi* construction as an example to demonstrate its development.

It is commonly known that the verb *yi* first appeared in pre-Qin texts meaning ‘complete, finish’. The verb was found to be used in Western Han (206 BC to AD 24) texts in the grammatical frame “*V (O) + yi*”, where *V* is a continuous verb and *yi*, a verb indicating a completed action.

From the Eastern Han (AD 25-220) to the Sui (AD 581-618) and the Tang (AD 618-907) dynasties, the “*V (O) + yi*” construction with continuous verbs was still not commonly used in Chinese texts, and there was no trace of instantaneous verbs used in this construction. Chinese texts where this structure appears include *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi* 三國志), *History of the [Former] Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), *History of the Latter Han Dynasty* (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書), *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語), *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術, and *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記. However, there are a large number of the “*V (O) + yi*” examples present in translated Chinese Buddhist sutras.

*Yi* was one of the most frequently used verbs in second position in the “*V_1OV_2*” construction during the Medieval Period where *V_2* is a verb denoting a completed action, the other forms being *bi* 畢, *jing* 竟 and *qi* 訳. All of these forms share the same
meaning ‘complete’, ‘finish’, or ‘come to an end’. Since the late 1970s, linguists have noticed the usage of yi in the translated sutras suggesting this could be related to the influence of the Sanskrit language in the original Buddhist sutras. Important studies include Hung-Nin Cheung (1977), Christoph Harbsmeier (1989), Zhu Qingzhi (1993), and Seishi Karashima (1998 and 2000). In a comparison of the Buddhist sutras in Sanskrit with their corresponding Chinese translations, Karashima states that this kind of yi mostly corresponds to the absolutive or gerund in Sanskrit (Karashima 1998, 2000). Jiang Shaoyu takes Karashima’s point further and remarks that there are two types of yi: yi₁ and yi₂, with yi₁ being a verb denoting perfective action which can only take continuous verbs, and yi₂, being a “highly grammaticalized (高度虚化 gaodu xuhua)” element which takes instantaneous verbs. Yi₁ has been used in Chinese since the Pre-Qin Period, while yi₂ is a new feature from the translation of the Sanskrit absolutive or gerund.

The appearance of excessive numbers of the “V (O) + yi” construction and the emergence of instantaneous verbs in the construction are thus due to the Sanskrit influence and the interlanguage errors of the translators in learning Chinese. Imperfect learning of the grammatical constraints of the Chinese “V (O) + yi” construction expanded the scope of the use of yi. The crucial point we must notice here is that the new phenomena in the “V (O) + yi” construction (V_instantaneous O yi) was not found in any Chinese texts prior to the Tang dynasty, a fact indicating that the expanded construction was not accepted into the Chinese linguistic system at that time. During the Tang dynasty, the new verb member (instantaneous verbs) in the “V (O) + yi” construction is not only frequently found in bianwen, it also appears in the writings of Chinese literati. The development of yi did not stop there. It was later gradually replaced by another perfective verb liao and in the late Tang dynasty, the perfective verb liao developed into a perfective aspect marker, the modern Chinese le₁.

To date, it is still unclear to us how the new, expanded construction merged and was accepted into the Chinese language. Even though we don’t know the exact process involved, the evolution of yi nonetheless is a case demonstrating that external language contact caused linguistic changes in the Chinese language. From this example, we can see that the change of yi was triggered by the foreign translators’ lack of distinction between the two different groups of verbs in Chinese. Their incorrect use of yi blurred the rule of the “V (O) + yi” construction. The interference of this new usage of yi resulted in a chain of changes in the Chinese language. This interference is the starting point of the changes. In this snowball effect, even though language contact did not directly influence the development of the perfective aspect marker le, it did play a role in forming the beginnings of the change.
5. Some observations

There have been a good number of special linguistic features introduced through language contact in Chinese texts during various periods as discussed above. Why is it that only a very few have influenced Chinese grammatical development? One of the reasons is probably related to the constraints of social factors. We think that whether or not a contact-induced feature can trigger language change depends on a crucial key—the acceptance of the new feature by the speakers of that language. We can see from the above examples that those new linguistic features harmonizing with or similar to Chinese syntactic structure seem to be accepted more easily, while those distinct from Chinese structures are less tolerated. The postverbal case markers found in translated sutras such as gu and those that appeared in Yuan baihua like gendi, shang, and shangtou are typologically different from the structure of Chinese. These features were only short-lived in certain written texts and never came to be accepted in the Chinese language system in the end. The perfective action yi, on the other hand, merged into the Chinese language. It blurred the original constraining rule of the “V (O) + yi” construction, but the appearance of instantaneous verbs in the verb position did not break the structural frame of the Chinese language. A somewhat parallel situation can be observed in the disposal construction. Between the Han and Tang dynasties, the serial verb construction (V1O1V2O2) in Chinese underwent a series of developments and changes: when O1=O2, the repeated object can be omitted. This time period happens to be the period when sutras were translated into Chinese from Sanskrit. The translators, due to the influence of the Sanskrit SOV word order, omitted O2, which resulted in the new grammatical form of V1O1V2. This new form developed into the narrow disposal construction where the full meaning of V1 was bleached or grammaticalized (Cao & Yu 2000a, 2000b). If the serial verb construction did not undergo changes, the new formation of the disposal construction probably would not have become one of the most important grammatical constructions in the Chinese language. Like the case of the new form of the “V (O) + yi” construction, this new form was influenced by language contact, and it also emerged in Buddhist texts earlier than in native forms, with higher occurrence rates as well.

As mentioned above, the influence of language contact on the structure of a language is closely tied to social factors. And yet social factors often are unpredictable. When we study language contact and its influence on language change synchronically, speakers of the language and social factors may help us to pinpoint the principles or rules for change. But in diachronic studies, because we don’t have anyone who speaks Ancient Chinese, all we can do is use the corpus of linguistic facts drawn from written texts during various dynasties. When these linguistic facts serve as the sole basis for us to study language contact and its effect, certain rules we have proposed may, at times, become
inapplicable. Taking the “V (O) + yi” formation as an example, we proposed that the “V (O) + yi” construction was expanded by blurring the Chinese structural rule for yi. This new formation was later accepted by Chinese and further developed in being applied to liao 了, and then to le1. It is a successful case where an error caused by imperfect learning of the Chinese language influenced Chinese language development. However, there are other cases where the Chinese structural rules were also blurred by the interlanguage errors of non-Chinese speakers and yet these features were not accepted into the Chinese language. For example, the words to indicate “plurality” of people in Classical and Medieval Chinese are deng, bei and cao. The frequency of the use of these words was significantly higher in translated sutras than in the Chinese texts of the same time since Sanskrit has a number category. After the Northern Song dynasty (AD 960-1126), mei 每 (or men) replaced the above forms as a plural marker for human beings. During the Yuan dynasty, there was a much higher frequency of the use of mei. In Yuan baihua, the use of mei was expanded beyond the marking of human beings to include animate nouns, such as mamei 馬每 ‘horses’, ying-goumei 鷹狗每 ‘eagles and [hunting] dogs’, and even to inanimate nouns such as caodimei 草地每 ‘grass’, and chaitanmei 柴炭每 ‘firewood-charcoal’. The expansion of the use of mei is associated with the language contact with the Mongols. The different system in marking plurality in Mongolian resulted in errors in overtly applying the plural markers to nouns beyond human beings. But the newly expanded usages of mei can only be found in Yuan baihua and later became extinct after the Mongols lost their power to the Chinese. It did blur the Chinese structure, but it was not permanently integrated into Chinese.

From the examples of the translated Buddhist sutras in the Medieval Period and those of Yuan baihua, it seems that structural similarity is a condition for a contact-induced feature to be accepted by Chinese language. But in reality, structural similarities do not always guarantee the acceptance of a new feature introduced via language contact. The prerequisite for a non-Chinese feature to emerge in the Chinese language system is that the feature has to be accepted by native Chinese language speakers. The new usage of yi and mei discussed above expanded Chinese grammatical structures, yet while the former triggered changes in Chinese grammar, the latter became extinct. If we examine the examples given in this paper from the perspective of typology, we can see that the three languages mentioned are of various language families, namely Sino-Tibetan (Chinese), Indo-European (Sanskrit), and Altaic (Mongolian). From the cases in Chinese, on the one hand, we can see that it is possible for grammatical changes to be triggered by a typologically different language in language contact situations. On the other hand, only very few language contacts have had a long-lasting impact. Social factors seem to play a more crucial/decisive role than syntactic comparability.
References


