Chinese Resultative Verb Compounds: Lexicalization and Grammaticalization

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This paper is an historical study of the formation of the Chinese resultative verb compounds (RVCs) that signal a resultant state of a non-agent with a V1V2 predicate. Metaphorization and metonymization, understood within the theoretical framework of Brinton & Traugott (2005), are proposed to have played a most important role in the formation of the RVC in Middle Chinese. Many scholars noted (Wang 1958, Ota 1958, and Mei 1991) that the Modern Chinese RVCs as a linguistic form did not exist in Old Chinese. Mei (1991) further claimed that the neutralization of the second verb in a matching transitive verb-verb sequence gave rise to the present-date RVC with a transitive-intransitive format. This paper, however, demonstrates that, in light of the polysemous structure of many verbs and Levin & Hovav’s theory on argument realization (2005), the ambitransitive nature of the verbs in these verbal sequences ultimately was responsible for the unification of the two verbs as a process of metonymization exemplified by hyperbole and its spread as a process of metaphorization. Moreover, it is also argued that, on the basis of several formal distinctions, Chinese RVCs can be separated into two different categories: those resulting from lexicalization and those resulting from grammaticalization.

Key words: resultative verb compounds, grammaticalization, lexicalization, ambitransitive