

## Morphosyntactic and Semantic Changes of Hakka *si2*: A Multi-level Analysis\*

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This study provides an analysis of the categorical shift and semantic extension of Hakka *si2* from three perspectives. First, the morphosyntactic shift from verb to adjective and to intensifying adverb may be understood as a process of reanalysis whereby there is an increase in the degree of expressiveness with the semantic extension being both metaphorically and metonymically motivated, and in particular, metonymic associations of the concept of death are pragmatically strengthened in the later usage. Second, the change is argued to be motivated both by subjectification and by the requirements of efficiency in communication. Finally, there is a discussion of the structure of the conceptual links and the related cognitive processes which may account for the use by the speaker of the grammatical forms of *si2* described in this analysis. It is hoped that this study will thus further suggest the motivation of such a linguistic activity with reference to the resolution of cognitive dissonance and to apply this present analysis to other hyperbolic expressions.

Key words: grammaticalization, reanalysis, metaphor, metonymy, subjectification, mental spaces, backstage cognition, Hakka *si2*

### 1. Introduction

In human cultural practices, talking about death is taboo. In a conversation, expressions related to death are usually replaced by euphemisms such as *pass away* in English or *zon2-cong3-san1* (轉長山) ‘going back to the Mainland; die’ in Hakka.

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However, such death-related expressions do not ‘die out’ at all. They are, on the other hand, frequently used as intensifiers or extreme case formulations to “display [a speaker’s] investment in, or stance toward, some state of affairs” (Edwards 2000:347). The development of death-related expressions as intensifiers is attested cross-linguistically. In English, there are examples like *John is dying to see his girlfriend*, *John loves his girlfriend to death* or *dead right*, *dead tired*, *dead easy* etc.; in Dutch, cases such as *dood ziek* ‘dead sick’ or *dood normal* ‘dead normal’ are observed. In Hakka, *si2* ‘death, die’ is also widely used as in *si2-ham5* (死鹹) ‘extremely salty’ or *si2-fon1-hi2* (死歡喜) ‘extraordinarily happy’. In Bolinger (1972:149ff), these expressions are delineated as hyperbole, boosters, or diminishers that embody the notions of extremity or absoluteness. While such observations of the usage of death-related expressions are quite widespread, little attention has been paid to the grammaticalization process and the semantic extension involved, or to their pragmatic-discourse functions, or to the cognitive process exploited by such a linguistic strategy. In other words, how do we account for the tabooed death expressions being broadened in the depiction of extremity?

The first issue to be addressed in this study is to investigate the mechanisms involved in the syntactic and semantic changes. The examples will be taken from Hakka. Within the Chinese language family, Hakka,<sup>1</sup> a language mainly spoken in Taiwan, mainland China, and some countries in Southeast Asia, is an example of a language in which expressions related to death have a wide range of usage. Often replaced by euphemisms when talking about the death of family members or friends, *si2*, literally meaning ‘die, death’, is nevertheless a widely used linguistic expression, along with its structural shift and semantic extension toward the pragmatic function of intensification indicating a speaker’s subjective evaluation of a situation.

The second issue to be discussed is what motivates language innovations. Cognitive approaches declare that linguistic structures can only be characterized in the context of a broader account of cognitive functioning (cf. Langacker 1987, 1990, Lakoff 1987, Taylor 1995, among others). Speakers look for a target linguistic expression appropriate for a conceptualization in order to achieve successful communication. Speakers must react to all the various restrictions inherent in a situation; and judging what is best for

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<sup>1</sup> Symbolizing the social status of the Hakka people, the word *Hakka* [hak4 ga1] literally means ‘guest people’. Two views are held as to the formation of the Hakka. The first maintains that they originate from the Central Plains of China, and because of invasion, civil war, and other historical factors, were forced to move mainly to southern China. Eventually, some of the Hakka migrated to Taiwan around the mid-nineteenth century (Hashimoto 1973, Luo 1998). The second view holds that the Hakka derive from southern Gan in the Song Dynasty, since the Hakka dialects bear features also found in such non-Chinese languages as She and Yao; and afterwards, some Hakka migrated to Taiwan in the early Qing Dynasty (Chappell 2001). Refer also to Chappell & Lamarre (2005) for a more detailed description.

communicative purposes, they often come up with innovative language usage, resulting in language changes.

The third issue to be tackled in this study is to uncover the hidden cognition seen in expressions related to *si2*. Far from being independent of experiential structure, language is deeply involved in expressing and characterizing a human understanding of the world. Language being one of the conspicuous manifestations of human cognition, the backstage cognition that goes on as human beings think and talk provides a structure to their mental activities and their social life. This endeavor hence not only demystifies the seemingly conflicting human values in terms of linguistic choice but also probes into the backstage cognition involved with the usage of hyperbolic expressions and the like.

In what follows, §2 will account for the categorical shift and semantic extension after the delineation of the phenomena exhibited by *si2*. Section 3 explicates the pragmatic-discourse motivations of language change in general and those for *si2* in particular. The hidden cognitive process involved in the employment of such a linguistic strategy is investigated in §4, followed by the conclusion in §5.

## 2. Categorical shift and semantic extension of *si2*

In this section, the grammaticalization process of *si2* will be addressed. The morpheme *si2* in Hakka literally means ‘death’ in opposition to *sang1* ‘life’ as in the expression *sang1 si2 tai3 se3* (生死大事) ‘the important matter of life and death’. Since a functional shift from a noun to a verb with zero derivation is quite common in Chinese languages, *si2* can also be used as a verb, with the function of report a death situation as illustrated by the following examples:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hakka is a Sinitic language consisting of several dialects spoken in Guangdong (廣東), Fujian (福建), Jiangxi (江西), Guangxi (廣西), Sichuan (四川), Hunan (湖南), and Guizhou (貴州) on the Mainland, and on Hainan island (海南島) and Taiwan (台灣). Within Taiwan, there are five Hakka varieties scattered around the island, including the *Si3yen3* (四縣), *Hoi2liuk8* (海陸), *Tai3pul* (大埔), *Ngieu5ping5* (饒平), and *Seu3on1* (詔安). According to the Council for Hakka Affairs in Taiwan, in 2006 there were approximately 6,800,000 Hakka on Taiwan, or about 27% of the total population. Phonological and morphological differences can be observed between the various subdialects. The data presented in this paper are mainly based on the *Si3yen3* Hakka dialect. *The Manual of Taiwan Hakka Tongyong Romanization System* (台灣客語通用拼音使用手冊) promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2003 is used to render the data. The tone system of *Si3yen3* dialect is given in the table:

調號 (tone number)	1	2	3	4	5	8
調值 (pitch value)	rising	falling	high level	short low	low level	short high
Example	<i>fong</i> (風)	<i>geu</i> (狗)	<i>tien</i> (電)	<i>muk</i> (目)	<i>mo</i> (無)	<i>hok</i> (學)

- (1) a. *A5yin1 si2-tet4 liong2 tiau5 ngiu5-e5*.<sup>3</sup>  
 Ayin die-ASP two CL cow-SF  
 阿英死忒兩條牛仔。  
 ‘Ayin suffered from the death of two cows.’
- b. *Lo5 ngin5-ga1 hon5-si2 do3 giel-hong3*.  
 old man-SF freeze-die on street-top  
 老人家寒死到街頂。  
 ‘The old man froze to death on the street.’
- c. *Lo5 ngin5-ga1 hon5 do3 si2*.  
 old man-SF freeze COMP die  
 老人家寒到死。  
 ‘The old man froze to the extent that he died.’
- d. *Ngie3-gung1 bun1 gi5 seul si2-si2*.  
 Ants-SF AG him burn die-die  
 蟻公分佢燒死死。  
 ‘All of the ants were burned to death by him.’

The four cases illustrate verbal features of *si2*, which functions as the predicate of the various syntactic structures. In example (1a), *si2* is the main predicate of the sentence, denoting the death of two cows. While it is *two cows* that died, *A5yin1*, the possessor of the two cows, is the person who suffered from their loss. This verbal feature of *si2* is also observed in example (1b) where it is the second predicate of the resultative compound *hon5-si2* (寒死); in (1c), *si2* is the predicate of the complement led by an overt complementizer *do3*, which introduces a complement of extent or result. Finally, example (1d) contains a verbal reduplication, in which *si2-si2* (死死) emphasizes that all ants were burned to death.

Aside from being used to make a report of a death in an objective manner, *si2*, although still retaining its verbal features, is often used by a speaker to indicate his or her affective attitude toward a particular state of affairs. Consider the following example:<sup>4</sup>

調名 (tone category)	<i>yinping</i> (陰平)	<i>yinshang</i> (陰上)	<i>yinciu</i> (陰去)	<i>yinru</i> (陰入)	<i>yangping</i> (陽平)	<i>yangru</i> (陽入)
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<sup>3</sup> Sinograms are also provided. The following abbreviations are used for the grammatical functions: AG, agent marker; ASP, aspect marker; CL, classifier; COMP, complementizer; NEG, negation marker; PART, particle; SF, suffix.

<sup>4</sup> This example is adopted from *Hakka Stories from Miaoli* (I) (苗栗縣客語故事集 (一)), p.82.

- (2) *Gi5 gong2: ngai5 teu3 lu3-e5 mo5 pan1, giang1 gui2 giang1*  
 he said I whole trip-SF NEG company fear ghost fear  
*do3 voi3 si2, ho2-cai3 du5-do2 ng5.*  
 COMP will die luckily bump into you  
 佢講：「佢透路仔無伴，驚鬼驚到會死，好在堵著你。」  
 ‘He said, “I had been all by myself for the whole trip, and I was so afraid of bumping into ghosts that I thought I would die; luckily, I bumped into you instead.”’

In this case, the verbal feature of *si2* is still retained as it follows the modal *voi3* (會) ‘may, could’. For a person to die from being terrified, while not impossible, would be quite unusual, and from the context, it is clear that *si2* does not denote the death of the speaker. Rather, the expression with *si2* is used by the speaker to express the emotional effect on him of his fear of encountering ghosts while he had been walking alone all by himself for the whole length of the trip and how lucky he was to bump into the addressee on the way and the use of the *si2* expression serves to exaggerate the speaker’s fear. Such an extension of the meaning of *si2* to describe a state of affairs as being of the nature of ‘to an extreme extent’ is indeed quite common, especially when the preceding predicate indicates a mental activity of the speaker as in *fon1-hi2 si2* (歡喜死) ‘extraordinarily happy’ or *fan5 si2* (煩死) ‘extremely irritated’. The following cases show more idiomatic expressions incorporating *si2*:

- (3) a. *pai1-se3 do3 voi3 si2.*  
 embarrassed COMP will die  
 敗勢到會死。  
 ‘The embarrassment is killing me.’  
 b. *si2 ciu5 m5 hi3.*  
 die then NEG go  
 死就毋去。  
 ‘I would die rather than go somewhere.’

In these two cases, *si2* still carries verbal features—it is placed after the modal *voi3* in (3a) and it functions as the main predicate in the first clause of a highly idiomatic *sui generis* conditional construction in (3b). In both examples, *si2* is employed by a speaker to exaggerate his or her emotional attitude toward the situation, and the use of *si2* in example (3a) and in example (3b) again serves to escalate the extent to which the speaker feels embarrassed, amplifying the extreme unwillingness of the person to go to a certain place.

When such an extended meaning is generalized, *si2* also extends its syntactic category into an adjective in a prenominal position modifying the noun phrase. Examine the following expressions in (4):

- (4) a. *si2-dui3-teu5* (死對頭)  
dead opposite head  
'bitter opponents'
- b. *si2-dong2* (死黨)  
dead gang  
'a sworn gang'
- c. *si2-soi3-zu1* (死睡豬)  
dead sleep pig  
'a lazy pig who sleeps away the whole day'
- d. *si2-hong3-e5* (死巷子)  
dead alley SF  
'a dead end'
- e. *si2-gui1-gi2* (死規矩)  
dead rule  
'rigid rules'

In all five examples, *si2* is shifted into an adjective placed in a prenominal position. These examples are like lexically filled constructions with their integrated idiomatic meanings (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988, Goldberg 2006). Their meanings are non-compositional, figurative, and affective (cf. Nunberg et al. 1994). The meaning of *si2* in each of these examples carries with it a metonymic inference related to the concept of death. In (4a), the prospect of death of a life is used to refer to the extreme extent of the nature of the opposition between two opponents. The integrated meaning of this expression refers to two opponents who oppose or criticize each other with strong feelings of hate and anger. Likewise, in (4b) and (4c), it is the condition of extremity associated with *si2* that is to be inferred by the listener to refer to close ties between friends as well as to the unacceptable behavior of a person who is so lazy that he or she can sleep away the whole day. While *si2* is modifying an animate noun phrase in the first three cases, it is modifying an inanimate object in both (4d) and (4e). Since a dead body is unmovable and rigid, such a meaning is integrated into the two expressions—a street with no way out and a rule that is difficult to change.

The modifying function of *si2* can be further developed into an intensifier adverb that is widely used to modify a stative predicate. Observe the following examples:

- (5) a. *si2-tung3* (死痛)  
 deadly-hurt  
 ‘hurt to death’
- b. *si2-ham5* (死鹹)  
 deadly-salty  
 ‘extraordinarily salty’
- c. *si2-hau3-siit4* (死好食)  
 deadly-love-eat  
 ‘excessively gluttonous’
- d. *si2-hau3-du2* (死好賭)  
 deadly-love-gamble  
 ‘obsessed with gambling’
- e. *si2-voi3-yiung3-cien5* (死會用錢)  
 deadly-able-spend-money  
 ‘extremely extravagant’
- f. *si2-m5-tang1-fa3* (死毋聽話)  
 deadly-NEG-listen-speech  
 ‘exceptionally rebellious’
- g. *si2-ho2-miang3* / *ho2-miang3-si2* (死好命/好命死)  
 deadly good life good life deadly  
 ‘blessed by the gods’
- h. *si2-pien5-ngi5* / *pien5-ngi5-si2* (死便宜/便宜死)  
 deadly cheap cheap deadly  
 ‘unbelievably cheap’

In the above examples, *si2* is rendered as an adverbial intensifier modifying a state of affairs denoted by the following stative predicate. The constructions embody the notions of absoluteness and extremity on the one hand, and express hyperbolic evaluation of the state of affairs on the other (cf. Bolinger 1972). In all these examples, the use of *si2* not only signifies the intensity of the state but also expresses the speaker’s intention to magnify the absoluteness of the situation. Even more intriguing in the context of this present study are the examples in (5g) and (5h) in which *si2* is modifying an expression with positive connotations. Such cases as *si2-ho2-miang3* (死好命) ‘blessed by the gods’ or *si2-pien5-ngi5* (死便宜) ‘unbelievably cheap’ show an apparent semantic incompatibility because of the inherent meanings of *si2* ‘die’ and *ho2-miang3* ‘blessed with a good life’ as well as those of *si2* ‘die’ and *pien5-ngi5* ‘cheap’. Notice also that *si2* becomes less constrained syntactically to the extent that it can be placed before the predicate or after the predicate as exemplified by (5g) and (5h).

To recapitulate, we have seen that syntactically *si2* exhibits features attributable to several different morphosyntactic categories, including verb, adjective and adverb.<sup>5</sup> Semantically, the meanings used in these expressions are metonymically inferred from the concept related to death—immovability, rigidity, absoluteness, and extremity. That *si2* can be used under different morphosyntactic categories that are associated with several different meanings, an outcome due to categorical shift and semantic extensions, processes described as grammaticalization.

<sup>5</sup> Notice that the noun and verb distinction of *si2* in Hakka is a zero formation. The function of noun will not be included since it is not relevant to the discussion.

A frequently portrayed feature of grammaticalization is that linguistic expressions may develop from concrete meanings to signify grammatical meanings in specific contexts (Heine 2005, Hopper & Traugott 2003). Through the changes in the steps along a path of a grammaticalization, linguistic expressions are decategorized from a place within major open-class paradigms into an area of more minor closed-class items. Hopper & Traugott (2003:107) state a unidirectional cline of categoriality as *major category* (> *intermediate category*) > *minor category* to reflect different morphosyntactic manifestations cross-linguistically. Major categories are nouns and verbs, intermediate categories refer to adjectives and adverbs, and minor categories comprise prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and demonstratives. While the source of the development is both older and less grammaticalized and the target is younger and more grammaticalized, they can coexist in the grammar and continue to be used.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the phenomena provide a case of heterosemy as a result of grammaticalization whereby two or more functions that derive from the same source belong to different morphosyntactic categories (Lichtenberk 1991).

Accordingly, the categorical shift observed in *si2* can be explicated by a grammaticalization chain that specifies a development from a verb into an adjective and then into an adverbial intensifier with all three morphosyntactic categories coexisting in the Hakka grammar. The development can be accounted for by an independent mechanism for syntactic change—namely reanalysis. Cases of reanalysis such as *[[back] of the barn]* > *[back of [the barn]]* given in Hopper & Traugott (2003:51, (3b)) involve constituency change, hierarchical structure change, and category label change.<sup>7</sup> Harris (2005:536ff) holds that the application of reanalysis can be motivated by at least two factors—ambiguity or stylistic variety or greater expressiveness. She maintains that when reanalysis happens due to the latter cause, the innovative structure typically does not replace the original structure, but continues to coexist with it, bringing up “syntactic doublets”, or a heterosemous phenomenon pointed out by Lichtenberk (1991). For instance, the innovative modal usage of *unda* in Georgian continues to coexist side by side with the verbal usage denoting ‘want’.

The syntactic change of *si2* can be deemed as a reanalysis motivated by stylistic variety or greater expressiveness. As pointed out previously, other than objectively reporting a death situation, *si2* is often employed by the speaker to designate his emotional affect even when it still functions as a verb. The stylistic mode is shifted to a more subjective and more expressive one. Then, not only is *si2* generalized to more and

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<sup>6</sup> Hopper (1991) renders such a phenomenon as layering and divergence among his list of principles of grammaticalization.

<sup>7</sup> Reanalysis, a mechanism of syntactic change, may involve a change in constituency, hierarchical structure, category labels, grammatical relations, and cohesion (Hopper & Traugott 2003:51).

more morphosyntactic categories, but it also relaxes its syntactic constraints by an increase in structural scope (cf. Traugott 2005:638). It can be placed in front of a noun, functioning as a modifying adjective. When further grammaticalized into an adverbial modifier, it can be placed either before the predicate or after the predicate. As *si2* is generalized by increasing its syntactic range, it becomes fused with collocating expressions as illustrated by some of the fixed frozen expressions. In brief, the phenomena of *si2* exemplify an instance of reanalysis that demonstrates several features—constituency change, hierarchical structure change, reassignment of *si2* to different syntactic category labels, as well as change of degree in cohesiveness.

The account of the morphosyntactic shift of *si2* is thus quite straightforward. What about the semantic development? One of the reviewers comments that once this categorical shift is completed, the semantic bleaching which goes together with it is completed too. The reviewer supports this claim by echoing Lorenz, who claims that generally intensifiers tend to be delexicalized or blunted and hence experience a loss in force and denotational meaning from the very moment of their inception (Lorenz 2002: 145). Nevertheless, Lorenz also maintains that while it might be true that an adverbial intensifier loses a certain amount of its propositional content during the process of grammaticalization, at the same time it is developing a “modulating, scaling function—upgrading or downtoning the item in its focus” (p.146). In fact, among the five types of adverbs given in Lorenz (2002:147ff), the evaluative adjective modifiers—such as *terribly*, *unbelievably*, or *dreadfully*—are portrayed as “besides scaling their focus, [also] express[ing] a judgmental notion on the part of the speaker” (p.149).

Lorenz’s view of the loss of semantic complexity and pragmatic significance has been challenged by many other researchers who declare that there is indeed a semantic and pragmatic gain along with the morphosyntactic decategorization in grammaticalization (cf. Sweetser 1990, Heine et al. 1991, Heine 2005, Traugott & König 1991, among others). “As grammaticalization proceeds, the semantic range of the emergent grammatical morphemes expands or generalizes” (Hopper & Traugott 2003:114). Focusing on the cognitive structures involved in the grammatical change, this line of research emphasizes the cognitive foundations of the process, and seeks to delineate the relationships between various functions and meanings. While meanings are developed into more abstract domains, some of the original more concrete semantic features may be generalized or even lost, but more abstract ones may be gained, some of which may even become pragmatically strengthened, not weakened, through cognitive mechanisms like metaphor and metonymy.

Analyzing the semantic changes of English modals like *must* and *may*, Sweetser (1990) argues that their various meanings can be understood in terms of Talmy’s (1988) force-dynamic relationships in that they develop from the deontic domain through the

epistemic domain to the speech-act domain. In a similar manner, Heine (2005:586) proposes a theory of meaning shift from one domain to another in grammaticalization chains such as *PERSON* > *OBJECT* > *ACTIVITY* > *SPACE* > *TIME* > *QUALITY*. Such transfers are depicted as metaphorical in nature because they involve a transfer from the concrete domains of human experience to the more abstract domains of space, time, or quality. For instance, in a cross-linguistic manner, the concrete body part ‘back’ has extended more abstract locative adpositions or adverbials ‘back, in back of’.

Meaning extensions that involve a shift from a concrete domain to an abstract domain are metaphorical in nature, but those that are gradual and contiguous are metonymic in nature. Conceptual metonymy involves a cognitive process whereby connections between entities within a given conceptual domain are established through contiguity and association (cf. Kövecses & Radden 1998:38). Semanticization of conversational inferences, a metonymic process also called context-induced reinterpretation in Heine et al. (1991) or pragmatic inferencing in Hopper & Traugott (2003), is claimed to be responsible for meaning development. The overall development of *while*, for instance, is “from reference to a relatively concrete state of affairs (a particular time) to expression of the speaker’s assessment of the relevance of simultaneity in describing events, to assessment of contrast between propositions” (Hopper & Traugott 2003:90ff). The motivations for greater expressiveness through metaphor and metonymy as well as reanalysis give rise to typical grammaticalization chains, as maintained by Hopper & Traugott (2003).

To return to the issue of the semantic development of *si2*, and disagreeing with the semantic bleaching of *si2* due to the categorical shift to an intensifier pointed out by one of the reviewers, I shall demonstrate that the semantic extensions of *si2* can be plausibly explicated by metaphor and metonymy. Furthermore, in §4, I shall argue that in addition to the morphosyntactic and semantic changes of *si2*, cognitive motivations can be detected, as evidenced by the semantic incompatibility between *si2* and its collocates. First, the meaning of *si2* is metaphorically extended from a more concrete domain of human experience (as in *hon5 si2* (寒死) ‘die from cold’) to the domain of object (as in *si2-hong3-e5* (死巷子) ‘a dead end’ to a more abstract domain of quality (as in *si2-ho2-miang3* (死好命) ‘blessed by the gods’ or *si2-pien5-ngi5* (死便宜) ‘unbelievably cheap’). Next, although the literal meaning of *si2* is seldom used due to the inauspicious associations it can arouse, inferences associated with ‘death’ are, nevertheless, metonymically strengthened in all the other usage. The concept of death leads to the inferences of immovability or rigidity. Death, located at the very end of a life spectrum, allows for the inferences of absoluteness or extremity. These metonymic associations are pragmatically reified in examples such as *si2-soi3-zul* (死睡豬) ‘a lazy pig who sleeps away the whole day’, *si2-gui1-gi2* (死規矩) ‘rigid rules’, *si2-ham5* (死鹹)

‘extremely salty’, or *si2-ho2-miang3* (死好命) ‘blessed by the gods’. In fact, all the examples discussed previously arise from metonymic strengthening of the associations of *si2*.

Notice that all the examples demonstrate not only metonymic strengthening of the concept of death but also of the negative connotations often associated with death. What are the factors that motivate the semantic extensions as well as the negative connotations associated with these functions? To put the question another way, how do we account for the conceptualization of death in such linguistic expressions when, on the other hand, people typically use euphemisms to replace death-related expressions when talking about death? In the next section, I shall elucidate this question from two perspectives—that of the subjectification of linguistic expressions and that of the use of a linguistic strategy for efficiency in communication.

### 3. Motivations for the morphosyntactic and semantic change of *si2*

Having discussed the mechanisms for the changes of *si2*, this section will demonstrate that the changes are motivated by two factors—subjectification and efficiency of communication. Subjectification involves speakers’ employment of linguistic forms with appropriate meanings to reify their subjective perspective for a communicative purpose. Often accompanied by a generalization of syntactic or morphological context in the case of grammaticalization, subjectification is a major factor in semantic change. Subjectification in grammaticalization, as Traugott (1995:32) puts it, refers to the development whereby “forms and constructions that at first express primarily concrete, lexical, and objective meanings come to... serve increasingly abstract, pragmatic, interpersonal, and speaker-based functions.” Citing Powell (1992), Traugott (1995:44f) illustrates that stance adverbs such as *generally* and *strictly* develop from manner adverbs to adverbs of modality to express the speakers’ evaluation of a proposition. In like manner, degree modifiers such as *pretty* and *awfully* shift from being manner adverbs to becoming particles to denote the value judgment of the speakers in regard to the referentiality of the lexical item selected. Another well known example is the change of English modals from deontic to epistemic meaning—a shift from a viewpoint based on laws external to the speech participants to one based on the participants. The following examples from Traugott (1995:33, (5)) can illustrate:

- (6) They must be married. (i.e., ‘Some external force requires them to be married’)
- (7) They must be married. (i.e., ‘It is obvious that they are married, I concluded that they are married’)

Subjectification hence provides a motivating factor for the morphosyntactic shift and semantic development of *si2* in this study. As demonstrated above, accompanying its morphosyntactic generalization from verb to adjective and then to adverb, *si2* has shifted its concrete objective meaning of denoting death to serve pragmatic and speaker-based functions—mainly to subjectively and negatively exaggerate the evaluation of a state of affairs.

Subjectification implies a dynamic view of language that changes all the time in accordance with what speakers seek to manifest in their mind at a certain time. In order to communicate successfully, they recreate or reinvent language every time in line with what they think to be the most successful strategy for communication. Expressivity and efficiency in communication are two general motivations for language change, as maintained by Blank (1999), and speakers adopt numerous linguistic strategies to speak more efficiently and expressively for the hearers to comprehend their meaning. Emphasizing the cognitive foundations for lexical semantic change, Blank (1999:70ff) lists six types of motivations: emergence of new concepts, abstract or distant referents, sociocultural change, close conceptual or factual relations, complexity and irregularity in the lexicon, and emotionally marked concepts. Among the six motivations, the last one is most relevant for this study. Blank (1999:80f) holds that emotionally marked concepts such as SEX, ANGER, DEATH, among others, are tabooed and are often avoided in a conversation. {*The princess died in a car accident.*} is not a recommended strategy since speaking of DEATH may offend the feelings of the listener, thus putting communicative success in jeopardy. Hence euphemisms are often created to guarantee communicative success.

However a completely different way of treating tabooed concepts like DEATH is to verbalize them by dysphemism as in {*The princess kicked the bucket.*}. While generally rendered as low-marked levels of speech, dysphemisms are considered to carry special expressive effects by speakers. In addition, expressive verbalization also occurs in other non-tabooed domains when speakers want to exaggerate or to “say things in a *drastic* or *hyperbolic* manner” (Blank 1999:82), so as to persuade the hearers to share their viewpoints. Metonymy and metaphor are again among the typical mechanisms, as illustrated by the French example *bordel* ‘brothel’ > ‘disorder, brawl’.

The versatile syntactic and semantic functions of *si2* discussed in this study demonstrate a case of expressive verbalization of the tabooed concept DEATH. In §2, we have seen how *si2* may expand its morphosyntactic and semantic ranges, how the conceptual domains can be metaphorically extended from concrete to more abstract, and how the meaning associations are metonymically strengthened in usage. Then how can such an employment of *si2* serve as a linguistic strategy for expressive and efficient communicative purpose?

Evaluation of a state of affairs is a matter of personal choice—a subjective judgment. Death, signifying the end point of life, is at the very end of the span of a life. In terms of the human understanding of existence, nothing can be more extreme or more absolute than death. Analogically, what is denoted by *si2* is being located at the very end of a scale, created by the state of affairs at any point of the discourse. The power of the expressiveness is reaching out to the listener, convincing that person to share with the speaker the same understanding of what he believes to be the case in that particular situation. Let us consider the case of *giang1-si2* (驚死) ‘frightened to death’ again. This expression is taken from a ghost story, and uttered by the character to express his fear of bumping into a ghost whilst on his way to a certain destination. In an earlier agrarian age, men often had to leave home and work elsewhere for weeks or even months at a time to eke out a living. The story is about a man whose wife is about to deliver a baby, and his employer has just told him to go home immediately after work in the evening. As he has to walk over hills and through woods all alone in the dark, he is extremely afraid. He then uses the expression to voice his great fear to someone he has just met along the way.

In this situation, it is natural for anybody to feel great fear if he has to walk all alone through the mountains in the dark. The prospect of such a situation fills the man with dread. Moreover, while walking over the mountain, he feels that his anxiety is much stronger than had been expected. To express how terrifying the situation can be, the speaker exploits the linguistic strategy of placing his condition of fear at the very top of the scale to justify his intense fear of the imagined ghosts so as to create sympathy on the part of the listener. The metonymic association with death and the overstatement of his condition not only efficiently reduce the speaker’s linguistic effort but also effectively communicate the state of his emotions to the listener.

The explication of this scenario can be applied to all the other usages when *si2* is used to overly amplify the subjective judgment of the state of the affairs. For instance, when a speaker utters *si2 ciu3 m5 hi3* (死就毋去) {“I would rather die than go (somewhere).”}, he or she effectively conveys his or her absolute determination of not going to whatever place it is in the discourse so as to stop the listener from persuading him or her to go. In the same manner, *si2-soi3-zul* (死睡豬) ‘a lazy pig who sleeps away the whole day’ or *si2-hau3-siit4* (死好食) ‘excessively gluttonous’ reduces the load that would otherwise have been necessary to produce the same language in a more complicated linguistic form by metonymically creating the image associated with death. In thus saving the linguistic effort which would otherwise have been necessary to describe such outrageous behavior, the innovative usage of *si2*, together with its collocation, successfully conveys the unreasonable laziness or the unbelievable gluttony in these two expressions. By the same token, *si2-ham5* (死鹹) ‘extraordinarily salty’, when used

to comment on the flavor of a dish, tends to draw the attention of the listener to double-check the dish again. Similarly, *si2-tung3* (死痛) ‘hurt to death’ will draw the listener’s sympathy in regard to the pain being undergone by the speaker. These linguistic expressions are overstatements that simply amplify the evaluative statement to a drastic and exaggerative way for efficiency of communication. The effect produced by the overstatement is reinforced by *si2* and its collocation in these examples since they both connote negatively, but what about those collocates that imply positive connotations?

Although the metonymic associations with *si2* tend to be negative, the nature of the intensification which it is able to express can however be exploited for evaluative purposes. The absolute value associated with *si2* is metonymically strengthened in those *si2* expressions with positive connotations. For instance, *ho2-miang3-si2 / si2-ho2-miang3* (好命死/死好命) ‘blessed by the gods’ is used to express how exceptionally blessed a person is. Another example is *si2-fon1-hi2* or *fon1-hi2-si2* (死歡喜/歡喜死) ‘exceedingly happy’ expresses a state of extreme happiness. Since nothing can go further than the point denoted by death, the speaker efficiently manifests his emotional state with such language. Moreover, the peculiarity due to the semantic incompatibility of *si2* and its collocation often gives rise to sarcastic or ironic functions of teasing or criticizing for communication.

No matter what communicative functions *si2* expressions serve, their feature of being subjective remarks on a state of affairs demonstrates an operation highly grounded in a speaker’s cognition—all the distinct grammatical forms of *si2* involve a speaker’s articulation of the contravention of his or her expectations. The endeavor of the next section aims to uncover the hidden cognitive process.

#### 4. The cognitive operation involved in the usage of *si2* expressions

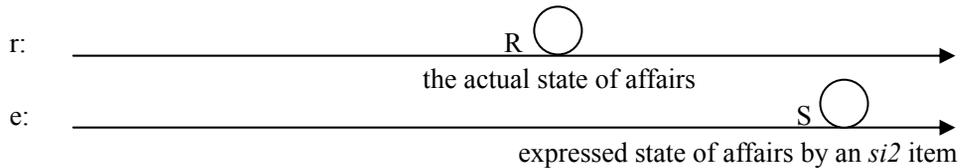
Language capacity, as stated in Sweetser & Fauconnier (1996:8f), allows speakers to “talk not just about what is, but also about what might have been, what will be, what is believed, hoped for, hypothesized, what is visually represented, make-believe, fiction, what happened, what should have happened, and much more.” Mental space theory, proposed by Fauconnier (1994, 1997), provides a general model for exploring such a fruitful interrelation between cognitive connections and language. Fauconnier (1997:1) points out that “mappings between domains are at the heart of the unique human cognitive faculty of producing, transferring, and processing meaning.” As opportunities for communicative activities occur, mental spaces necessary in the exchange are constructed and connected by speakers to accord with the grammar, the context and the cultural background (cf. Sweetser & Fauconnier 1996). Mental spaces are “the domains that discourse builds up to provide a cognitive substrate for reasoning and for interfacing

with the world” (Fauconnier 1997:34). Forming partial structures that proliferate themselves as discourse sets forth, mental spaces function in partitioning the discourse and the knowledge structures in a fine-grained manner. Language is the most prominent tool for human beings to manifest various aspects of human cognition. A configuration of spaces through which they move as discourse proceeds is created by them to keep track of the discourse dynamics in order to reason and to communicate.

The mappings between spaces are of paramount importance to any comprehension of semantic and pragmatic interpretation since they help elucidate logically baffling phenomena such as counterfactuals, propositional attitudes, referential opacity, narrative tenses and deictics, and the like. To keep track of the complex network of spaces, the participants shift their perspectives through the use of various strategies, which are grammatically encoded by space builders, tenses, moods, and other grammatical devices (cf. Langacker 1987, Taylor 1995). While more indirect grammatical devices such as cultural and contextual factors can trigger mental spaces, mental spaces are mainly set up by explicit space builders. Referring to a whole range of linguistic elements that serve as triggers for setting up mental spaces, space builders include adverbials of locations and time, adverbs like *possibly* and *really*, connectives like *if...then*, and certain verbs like *believe* or *hope*. For example, in saying {*John believes Mary is nice.*}, a base space for John’s beliefs is built, with minimal explicit structure corresponding to Mary’s being nice. In uttering {*Last semester, Mary was nice.*}, a space for last semester is constructed, and in uttering {*John believes last semester Mary was nice.*}, a space for last semester is built, embedded in a belief space, which in turn is embedded in the base space. A space network hence features three key notions. First, very often several spaces can be built and connected at the same time during any point in discourse. In addition, one of the possible spaces is selected based on the viewpoint of the discourse participants. Furthermore, starting from the base, movement from spaces to spaces as viewpoints shift happens when such hidden cognitive processing is manifested by overt linguistic mechanisms as discourse participants maintain the discourse dynamics in order to reason and communicate.

Thus far the major features of the mental space framework have been introduced, and the issue in question now is how such a framework can help explicate the cognitive operation involved in the usage of *si2* expressions. The discussion above clearly elucidates the evaluative feature associated with the usage of *si2*. It illustrates an overt mechanism whereby a speaker may link mental space configurations of real situations and his cognitive conceptualizations of the world. More specifically, the information structure evoked by *si2* consists of two linear scalar models, whereby two mental spaces are constructed at the time of utterance. Since the real situation is incompatible with what is expected by the speaker after his or her internally grounded assessment of the

situation, to represent his or her contravention of expectations, the speaker employs a linguistic strategy to upgrade the status of the situation onto a space farther toward the end of a scale. The cognitive structure that represents the mental activities involved in the evaluative function of *si2* expressions can be expounded as the following figure. The letter *r* stands for the scale of real situations whereby *R* specifies the actual state of affairs; the letter *e* stands for the scale of expressed situations whereby *S* specifies the indicated state of affairs expressed by a *si2* expression:



**Figure 1:** The mental network invoked by *si2*

As indicated in the figure, the usage of *si2* has the function of placing the speaker's evaluation at the upper end of the scale, enhancing the contravention of his or her expectation. The sharp contrast created between the two spaces *R* and *S* serves to catch the listener's attention, hence effectively and efficiently convincing him or her to accept the speaker's viewpoint. This explication also accounts for what gives rise to the success of communication in the usage of *si2* expressions in drastically overstating or exaggerating a state of affairs.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The study has accomplished an analysis from multi-leveled perspectives. The answer to the question as to the nature of the intriguing complexity exhibited by the usage of *si2* in Hakka is teased out first from the linguistic layer, then from the communicative layer, and finally from the cognitive layer.

First, although expressions related to death are found in many languages to develop into other functions such as intensifiers, the structural and semantic development is often left unexplored. This study has explicitly demonstrated the mechanisms involved in the morphosyntactic and semantic expansion of *si2*-related expressions in Hakka, hoping to shed light on similar phenomena in other languages. It is claimed that the increase in the structural scope of the expression is due to a reanalysis in order to create a greater degree of expressiveness and that the semantic extension of the expression follows from the principles of metaphorical abstraction and metonymic strengthening. In addition, the recruitment of *si2* in a shift from concrete and objective meanings to construe a

speaker's subjective judgment of the world is a linguistic strategy motivated not only by subjectification but also by efficiency in communication. Finally, the cognitive process involved in the usage of *si2* expressions to manifest the speaker's out-of-expectation mental activity is explicated by two linear scales whereby mental spaces are created to allow for the sharp contrast between the real state of affairs and the indicated one.

What this practice of the use of *si2* expressions boils down to in a speaker's cognition can be deemed an example of cognitive dissonance. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance developed by Festinger (1957), there is a tendency for individuals to look for consistency among their cognitions. When inconsistency occurs between attitudes or behaviors, dissonance arises. A person who has dissonant or discrepant cognitions suffers from psychological dissonance, which is experienced as unpleasant exertion of a psychological nature. Hence something must be done to eliminate the dissonance. There are three ways to remove the dissonance: by reducing the significance of the dissonant beliefs, by adding more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, or by altering the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent with the consonant beliefs (Festinger 1957). According to Festinger (1957), to avoid dissonance is a human need as basic as to satisfy hunger. The expression *sour grapes* (from an Aesop's fable) provides a good example. While the theory is concerned with the relationships among cognitions, it has been applied in psychological studies to explain various kinds of human behavior, particularly the formation and change of attitudes involved in decision-making and problem-solving. The employment of a dysphemism such as the use of expressions related to death—a strategy of the verbalization of tabooed concepts—might be considered as a means to remove the cognitive dissonance which emerges due to the contravention of expectations in the use of a taboo word. A more in-depth investigation into the psychological perspective still remains to be done, however.

Furthermore, the usage of *si2* expressions is associated with certain pragmatic-discourse functions. Such a pragmatic-discourse perspective needs to be grounded in pragmatic theories such as the Politeness Principles of Leech (1983), among others. An examination of the pragmatic-discourse functions in a conversational setting grounded in pragmatic theories also still remains to be done.

What this study does suggest, however, is the application of the analysis to other hyperbolic expressions. Hyperbole is one of the “sensible figures altering and affecting the *mynde* by alteration of sense or intendements in whole clauses or speeches,” as maintained by the famous philosopher George Puttenham in chapter 18 of his book, edited by Smith (1904:169). Research on hyperbole, extreme case formulations, or overstatements often examines these phenomena in a conversational setting, focusing on the pragmatic and interactional functions in a dynamic format (cf. Edwards 2000, McCarthy & Carter 2004, Norrick 2004, Pomerantz 1986, among others). The multi-

leveled analysis of the concept of death in Hakka in this study hence provides an avenue to explore the use of other hyperbolic expressions in the future.

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## 客語「死」形態句法及語意的改變： 多層次的分析

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本研究從語言、溝通及認知三個層次分析客語「死」字的詞類轉換及語意延伸。首先，「死」經由「重新分析」的過程，從動詞改變成形容詞，再改變為強調副詞，為了情感表達程度的提昇，「死」的語意經由「隱喻」及「轉喻」而擴張，特別是與「死亡」的概念關聯的意義藉由語用而強化。其次，「死」的句法及語意的改變是基於語言使用者「主觀化」及「溝通上的效率性」。最後，本文也剖析語言使用者使用「死」的認知過程及概念結構，認為是說話者為了解決「認知失調」的心理而採取的語言手段，同時本文也建議應用本分析於其他誇張語詞的可能性。

關鍵詞：語法化，重新分析，隱喻，轉喻，主觀化，心智空間，後台認知，客語「死」