

# Percorsi in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa V

*Quaderni di studi dottorali  
alla Sapienza*

a cura di Marina Miranda



SAPIENZA  
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

2026

# Indice

|                                                                                                                  |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Prefazione                                                                                                       |    |
| <i>Federica Casalin, Franco D'Agostino</i>                                                                       | 9  |
| Introduzione                                                                                                     |    |
| <i>Marina Miranda</i>                                                                                            | 11 |
| PARTE I – ARTE                                                                                                   |    |
| 1. Notes on a Stone <i>Stūpa</i> -shaped Pagoda from Yecheng<br>(Hebei Province, PRC)                            |    |
| <i>Hong Li</i>                                                                                                   | 25 |
| PARTE II – LETTERATURA                                                                                           |    |
| 2. Gli spazi della poesia nella Cina odierna: versi in voce<br>tra i ciliegi di Shanghai                         |    |
| <i>Martina Benigni</i>                                                                                           | 43 |
| 3. L'istituzionalizzazione della morte: traduzione del<br>manoscritto di epoca Qin * <i>Taiyuan you sizhe</i>    |    |
| <i>Mirko Bergamini</i>                                                                                           | 57 |
| 4. Traduzione annotata e analisi de <i>Qike song</i> di Wu Li:<br>i sette vizi capitali in versi classici cinesi |    |
| <i>Yuanyuan Bu</i>                                                                                               | 71 |

5. Tra il serio e il faceto: massime di medici e filosofi sul vivere raffinato nel *Laṭā'if al-zurafā' min ṭabaqāt al-fuḍalā'*  
*Michela Davolos* 85

6. Le Lettere di Na Singöl e le pratiche di scrittura della Corea del XV secolo  
*Daniele Di Pasquale* 95

### PARTE III – LINGUISTICA

7. Joseph Edkins and the Introduction of Western Physiology in China through the *Shenli qimeng*  
*Viola De Monte* 107

8. *Ouhua yufa*: un'analisi comparativa degli studi in Cina e all'estero  
*Marzia Imperato* 119

9. Revisiting the Grammaticalization of Verbs in Chinese: A Perspective Inspired by Ma Beijia  
*Erica Lo Presti* 137

10. La diffusione nell'accademia cinese dell'approccio storico-discorsivo (DHA): uno sguardo iniziale  
*Alessia Paolillo* 147

11. Eight Boat Names: A Corpus-based Study of Arabic Nautical Terminology in the Mediterranean Migration Context  
*Giuseppe Pensabene Perez* 167

### PARTE IV – STORIA

12. Adaptive Hegemony: A Gramscian Analysis of North Korea's July 1<sup>st</sup> Economic Measures  
*Irene Chianese* 199

|                                                                                                                       |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 13. Classi dirigenti e strutture dello Stato in Algeria: il contributo di Nāṣir Ġābī                                  |     |
| <i>Lorenzo Scala</i>                                                                                                  | 217 |
| 14. Fengtian Girls' Normal School (1906–1911): A Case Study of Local Institutional Experimentation in Late Qing China |     |
| <i>Peipei Tang</i>                                                                                                    | 229 |
| 15. La figura di Fei Xiaotong tra eredità storica e riletture contemporanee                                           |     |
| <i>Francesca Vomeri</i>                                                                                               | 253 |
| PARTE V – STUDI CULTURALI                                                                                             |     |
| 16. The Birth of the Archive of Family Images in the Songzhuang Area (Beijing, PRC)                                   |     |
| <i>Désirée Marianini</i>                                                                                              | 279 |
| 17. Pixelated Borders: East Asia's Game Industry Between Regional Integration and Global Flows                        |     |
| <i>Sara Morini</i>                                                                                                    | 291 |
| Abstracts                                                                                                             | 299 |
| Autori                                                                                                                | 311 |

## 9. Revisiting the Grammaticalization of Verbs in Chinese: A Perspective Inspired by Ma Beijia

*Erica Lo Presti*

### 9.1. Introduction

Grammaticalization is a process of linguistic change by which originally lexical elements gradually become specialized for grammatical functions<sup>1</sup>. It is a key mechanism of syntactic and semantic change in natural languages. Understanding how grammaticalization operates in specific linguistic systems allows us to grasp both universal tendencies and language-specific developments.

Since grammaticalization theory gained prominence in the early 2000s, scholars have increasingly applied it to Chinese. One of the central issues that have emerged is why Chinese exhibits an unusually high number of grammaticalization cases involving verbs. We can say that the grammaticalization of verbs in Mandarin Chinese can account for a great number, if not the majority, of the grammaticalization cases observed (Ma 2014: 1; Xing 2003: 101). It is widely known for example that all of the Chinese preverbal prepositions (*jieci* 介词) emerged through the grammaticalization of verbs (Oota [1958] 2003: 231; Ma 2002: 4; Ma 2014: 33).

Past scholars showed that there apparently is a direct correlation between changes in verbal semantics and the emergence of new grammatical elements.

This is the main reason why studying grammaticalization cases

---

<sup>1</sup> For more extended definitions of grammaticalization see: Heine *et al.* 1991: 51; Hopper, Traugott 2003: 1; Lehmann 2015: 11; Bybee *et al.* 1994: 4-5; Reinöhl 2016: 19-23.

involving verbal morphemes which specialize in various grammatical functions is crucial to understand the phenomenon as a whole.

Two notable contributions that exemplify different approaches to the study of grammaticalization of Chinese verbs are two works by Janet Xing and Ma Beijia, that will be discussed in the following sections.

## 9.2. Previous research: Janet Xing and the rise of grammaticalization studies in Chinese

Before Ma's work, one of the most comprehensive attempts to describe the grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese has been Janet Xing's study *Grammaticalization of Verbs in Mandarin Chinese*, whose approach combines syntactic, semantic, and typological perspectives, as is typical of studies that adopt grammaticalization theory as their theoretical framework. Xing was one of the first scholars to acknowledge that all verbs undergoing a grammaticalization process must necessarily pass through a serial verb stage<sup>2</sup>, as a core passage in the developmental cline from full lexical verbs to grammatical morphemes<sup>3</sup>. This process is characterized by three main syntactic changes: serialization, de-centralization, and ultimately functionalization. These structural shifts are described as instances of syntactic reanalysis, in which the surface form of the expression remains stable while its internal structure and function evolve, a definition she takes from Langacker's notion of "syntactic reanalysis" (Langacker 1977: 58).

From a semantic point of view, Xing gives a definition of two distinct types of original lexical meanings: the *etymological source meaning*, which refers to the earliest attested meaning of the morpheme, and the *grammatical source meaning*, which is the specific meaning from which the grammatical function develops. Taking the

---

<sup>2</sup> Serial verb construction: «a sentence that contains two or more verb phrases or clauses juxtaposed without any marker indicating what the relationship is between them» (Li, Thompson 1981: 594).

<sup>3</sup> The definition of "cline" used here is the one provided by Hopper and Traugott: a series of small transitions from one category to another that tend to be similar in type across languages, and also «a metaphor for the empirical observation that cross-linguistically forms tend to undergo the same kinds of changes or have similar sets of relationships, in similar orders» (Hopper, Traugott 2003: 6).

grammaticalization of the verb *jiang* 将 as an example, its etymological source meaning would be “to sustain” or “to command”. Through metaphorical extension, this meaning later developed into the more general sense of “to take”, which is the grammatical source meaning of the morpheme resulting from the grammaticalization process (Xing 2003: 118).

So, even before the grammaticalization process starts, semantic change is initiated through metaphorical extension, whereby concrete and specific meanings become more abstract and general.

Xing identifies several motivational factors that explain why the serial verb construction lies at the core of verbal grammaticalization in Chinese, such as iconicity (especially the temporal sequence of the two verbs contained in the structure), semantic primacy (where one verb carries the core meaning), structural ambiguity, analogical extension and the principle of economy. These factors enable the reanalysis of the verb as a grammatical morpheme.

Pragmatic interference is also essential and present in all stages of grammaticalization, as repeated contextualization usually leads to conventionalization.

Finally, Xing highlights the importance of known typological features of Chinese, such as the lack of inflectional morphology and the reliance on word order and context, which create the right environment for the grammaticalization process.

Xing’s study had a great impact on subsequent research on the topic. One of its strengths is the early recognition of the relevance of the serial verb construction in the grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese. Yet, this study presents a limitation common to many works on grammaticalization in Mandarin Chinese, that is its reliance exclusively on primary sources drawn from texts in Literary Chinese (*Wenyan* 文言), without incorporating dialectal data, an aspect that is more fully explored in the work of Ma Beijia, to which the next section is dedicated<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Given the limits of space of this article, it is not possible here to provide a more detailed account of the diachronic perspective within these two studies on grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese are situated.

### 9.3. New perspectives in Ma Beijia's study

Following the earlier work by Janet Xing, Ma Beijia's book *Hanyu dongci yufahua* 汉语动词语法化 (Grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese) focuses on grammaticalization processes involving originally verbal lexemes that have been reanalyzed as grammatical morphemes. One notable difference between the two studies is the substantially broader range of data and case studies presented by Ma, encompassing eleven chapters and over a thousand pages of analysis.

The first three chapters of Ma's work outline the theoretical background of the study, introducing the basic principles of grammaticalization theory with particular emphasis on the interaction between cognitive, semantic-syntactic and typological factors. The following chapters present an extensive number of case studies, grouped according to the grammatical outcome of the grammaticalization process, for instance, from verb to preposition or from verb to adverb. Within each chapter however, verbs are further grouped according to their original lexical meanings.

This classification reflects Ma's recognition of the principle that verbs sharing similar original semantic functions tend to follow similar grammaticalization paths. At the same time, it also serves to demonstrate that semantic change alone cannot fully explain the grammaticalization of verbs, as other factors previously mentioned, such as cognitive, syntactic, and typological influences, must also be taken into account.

Another notable contribution of Ma Beijia's work lies in her attention to the interplay between verbal grammaticalization and the semantic and syntactic categorization of nouns. Unlike Xing, Ma emphasizes that the extension of a verb's combinatory capacity (*dapei nengli* 搭配能力), i.e., its ability to co-occur with an increasingly wider range of nominal elements, is a crucial indicator and driving force in its grammaticalization (Ma 2014: 49).

Drawing on a wide range of examples, Ma demonstrates that changes in the semantic subcategories of nouns, including shifts from inanimate to animate referents or from concrete to abstract meanings, can affect the nature of the verb's argument structure and contribute to its reanalysis as a grammatical marker.

For instance, the verb *xiang* 向, a verb originally with the meaning

“to point towards”, usually combining with inanimate nouns denoting direction, gradually extended its combinatory scope to include animate nouns, which facilitated its grammaticalization into a preposition (Ma 2014: 37-38).

A similar pattern can be observed in the grammaticalization of the verb *ba* 把, originally meaning “to hold”, which is one of the most widely studied cases of grammaticalization due to its frequency as a grammatical morpheme. Among other changes, such as the already mentioned use as a serial verb, this morpheme underwent a shift that enabled it to combine with a broader range of noun types, allowing it to become an object marker within the disposal construction (*chuzhi shi* 处置式) (Ma 2014: 367)<sup>5</sup>. In Ma’s view, such developments exemplify the typical process of semantic generalization that has been observed in grammaticalization theory more broadly (Heine *et al.* 1991: 17, 21; Hopper, Traugott 2003: 100-106).

More importantly, she argues that the transformation of nominal categories not only reflects but also pushes the verbal grammaticalization forward and may serve as an important clue for identifying its stages. This is another fact that can help us understand how syntactic and cognitive factors, such as the psychological tendency toward implicitness in language use, interact with semantic shifts in shaping grammatical change<sup>6</sup>.

#### 9.4. Accounting for diversity through dialectal data

One of the most important innovations of Ma Beijia’s study is the strategic and comprehensive use of dialectal data at various points throughout the book. This constitutes an interesting development in

---

<sup>5</sup> The term “Disposal construction” refers to a syntactic structure in which the object of the sentence is moved from its original position in the SVO structure, thereby receiving emphasis. This construction, a language specific form of what is known in typological linguistics as “Differential object marking” (DOM, *qubixing binyu biaoji* 区别性宾语标记), can introduce a predicate that describes how an individual or object is treated or handled. In Chinese this involves the use of prepositions such as *ba* 把 or *jiang* 将 as markers of the anticipated object.

<sup>6</sup> On the psychological and cognitive tendency toward implicitness in language use, particularly in the context of grammaticalization, see Hopper, Traugott (2003: 63-66; 81-85), where they discuss semantic bleaching and the inferential basis of grammaticalization.

the field of grammaticalization studies within the Sinitic language domain<sup>7</sup>.

Obviously, the diachronic study of grammaticalization processes in Chinese cannot ignore data from the dialects, as they may preserve features typical of earlier stages of the language or attest to different outcomes of similar processes to those observed in the standard/literary language. Dialectal data is often essential for historical linguistics, yet dialects have long been neglected in applications of the grammaticalization theory to Sinitic languages.

Ma Beijia's main focus is on the grammaticalization of verbs in Mandarin Chinese and not on the dialectal varieties; however, her study does integrate dialectal data to look at certain grammaticalization cases through different perspectives, enriching and deepening her observations. One of the most interesting cases can be found in her discussion of aspectual particles (Ma 2014: 63), where she highlights regional variation in the grammaticalization of *zhe* 着. Originally a verb meaning "to touch" or "to get", *zhe* developed into a durative aspect marker in northern dialects, whereas in southern varieties it was reanalyzed as a perfective marker. In these southern dialects, durative aspect is instead expressed through more complex constructions derived from locative expression, for instance, \**guanhai* 关海 in Shanghainese, \**laige* 来个 in Hangzhounese, and \**shici* 是刺 in Wenzhounese<sup>8</sup>. This pattern confirms a broader grammaticalization trajectory of grammaticalization in Chinese, where spatial notions frequently give rise to aspectual and stative meanings.

Further dialectal comparisons provide a new perspective on the analysis of verbs such as *cong* 从 and *gen* 跟, originally meaning "to follow" (Ma 2014: 262–265). In Mandarin, *cong* 从 was grammaticalized as a preposition marking motion from a point, while *gen* 跟 typically introduces a comitative phrase<sup>9</sup>. However, in some northern dialects,

---

<sup>7</sup> The term "dialect" is used here to refer to non-standard and non-canonical varieties of Chinese.

<sup>8</sup> As the original phonetic transcriptions of these dialectal forms are not provided by the author, Pinyin, the standard transliteration system for Mandarin Chinese is used here as an approximation.

<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the preposition *gen* 跟 may also be analyzed primarily as a source or origin marker in Mandarin; interpreting it as a comitative marker is made possible by contextual elements, such as the semantics of the main verb or the presence of

*gen* 跟 also retains older or parallel grammatical functions: it can indicate motion from a location, a usage attested since Yuan-era sources, or function as a locative verb meaning “to be at”, much like *zai* 在 in Mandarin. These examples demonstrate how dialectal data can reveal alternative grammaticalization pathways not always visible in the standard language.

As a last example of usage of dialectal data in this volume, in Chapter 11 (Ma 2014: 1039-1040), Ma opens her discussion of semantic-syntactic evolution by turning again to dialectal material. She shows that verbs often undergo processes of abstraction before becoming grammaticalized.

For instance, as a modal predicative word meaning “to be allowed”, “to be possible”, northern dialects grammaticalized the verb *xing* 行, originally meaning “to walk”, while Wenzhounese grammaticalized *yongzhao* 用着, originally meaning “to put into use”. As a marker of perfective aspect, northern dialects grammaticalized the verb *liao* 了, originally meaning “to accomplish”, while southern varieties grammaticalized the verb *you* 有, originally meaning “to exist”.

Conversely, the same word in the proto language has in some cases been grammaticalized into different functions, for instance *shi* 是, originally an anaphoric third person pronoun, has evolved as a copula verb in the northern varieties, whereas it has grammaticalized into a marker of perfective aspect in some southern varieties or as possibly a locative verb in dialects like Cantonese, Min, Hakka, and Wenzhounese.

Ma even draws cross-linguistic parallels with English modals and auxiliaries, illustrating that the semantic recycling of existing lexical items into grammatical markers is a widespread tendency, grounded in common cognitive patterns across languages and cultures.

Although the inclusion of dialectal data in a work that extensively analyzes Chinese verbs through the lens of grammaticalization theory is in itself a highly innovative contribution, the role of dialects in this study remains somewhat peripheral, and the majority of the grammaticalization cases analyzed in the volume do not include any mention to dialectal data.

---

adverbs like *yiqi* 一起 “together”.

## 9.5. Conclusion

Comparing Janet Xing's work with the more recent study by Ma Beijia, not only highlights some key points of convergence, such as the central role of verbs in grammaticalization processes in Chinese, but also shows how methodological approaches have evolved over time. Both authors share a theoretical grounding in grammaticalization theory and emphasize phenomena like the connection between verb serialization and syntactic reanalysis. Both authors emphasize the interplay of cognitive, semantic, syntactic, and typological factors in grammaticalization. However, Ma expands the framework considerably, not only by analyzing a much wider sample of verbs, but also with an attention on the mutual influence between verbs and nouns, thus demonstrating that changes in nominal semantics can actively drive verbal grammaticalization.

One of the most innovative aspects of Ma's work is her inclusion of dialect data, which enriches our understanding of grammaticalization paths and reveals patterns that would otherwise remain hidden if we focused solely on Mandarin Chinese and Literary Chinese. Dialects, often overlooked in previous studies on grammaticalization in Sinitic languages, emerge here as an important resource for reconstructing various grammaticalization processes.

Ultimately, Ma Beijia's volume not only updates and broadens Xing's work but also points toward new directions for research in Chinese grammaticalization. Ma's integration of dialectal data is especially valuable, as it reminds us that the study of linguistic change must take into account all the full range of structural and functional variation found in languages.

## Bibliography

BYBEE JOHN, PERKINS REVERE, PAGLIUCA WILLIAM (1994), *The Evolution of Grammar, Tense, Aspect and Modality in the Languages of the World*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press.

- HEINE BERND, CLAUDI ULRIKE, HÜNNEMEYER FRIEDERIKE (1991), *Grammaticalization: A Conceptual Framework*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- HIMMELMANN NIKOLAUS (1997), *Deiktikon, Artikel, Nominalphrase: Zur Emergenz syntaktischer Struktur*, Tübingen, Max Niemer Verlag.
- HOPPER PAUL J., CLOSS TRAUGOTT ELISABETH (2003), *Grammaticalization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- LEHMANN CHRISTIAN (2015), *Thoughts on Grammaticalization*, Berlin, Language Science Press.
- LI CHARLES N., THOMPSON SANDRA A. (1981), *Mandarin Chinese, a Functional Reference Grammar*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- LI YONG (2014), *Hanyu dongci yufahua de duoshijiao yanjiu* (Multiperspective Research on Grammaticalization of Verbs in Chinese), Jinan, Shandong Daxue chubanshe
- MA BEIJIA (2002), *Jindai hanyu jiec* (Prepositions in Modern Chinese), Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.
- (2014), *Hanyu dongci yufahua* (Grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese), 2 Vols., Beijing, Zhonghua Zhonghua shuju.
- LANGACKER RONALD (1977), "Syntactic Reanalysis", in Li Charles N. (ed.), *Mechanisms of Syntactic Change*, Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 57-139.
- OTA TATSUO [1958] (2003), *Zhongguoyu lishi wenfa* (A Historical Grammar Modern Chinese), Beijing, Beijing Daxue chubanshe.
- REINÖHL UTA (2016), *Grammaticalization and the Rise of Configurationality in Indo-Aryan*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- XING ZHIQUN JANET (2003), "Grammaticalization of Verbs in Mandarin Chinese" (*Hanyu dongci de xuhua*), *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 31.1, 101-144.
- (2013), "Semantic Reanalysis in Grammaticalization in Chinese", in Zhuo Jing-Schmidt (ed.), *Increased Empiricism: New Advances in Chinese Linguistics*, 223-246.
- (2015), "A Comparative Study of Semantic Change in Grammaticalization and Lexicalization in Chinese and Germanic Languages", *Studies in Language*, 39.3, 594-634.
- (ed.) (2020), *A Typological Approach to Grammaticalization and Lexicalization, East Meets West*, Berlin, De Gruyter.

## Abstracts

### Revisiting the Grammaticalization of Verbs in Chinese: A Perspective Inspired by Ma Beijia

*Erica Lo Presti*

This paper offers an insight on the approach to verbal grammaticalization in Chinese in the volume *Hanyu dongci yufahua* 汉语动词语法化 (Grammaticalization of verbs in Chinese), by Ma Beijia 马贝加. The innovative aspects of this study are highlighted in comparison with a previous study by Janet Xing on the same topic. While Xing emphasizes syntactic reanalysis and semantic abstraction within serial verb constructions, focusing on Classical Chinese texts, Ma broadens the scope of analysis by integrating standard and dialectal data. Her approach combines cognitive, syntactic, semantic, and typological perspectives, examining the changing combinability of verbs and nouns to explain the process of their transformation into grammatical markers. The comparison highlights the value of dialect data in tracing grammaticalization processes and suggests new directions for the study of grammaticalization in Sinitic languages.

## Autori

ERICA LO PRESTI, dottoranda di ricerca, *curriculum* Asia Orientale, 40° ciclo - titolo da conseguire nel 2028, con discussione della tesi *Grammaticalization Processes in Sinitic Dialects*; Supervisore Alessandro Leopardi, Co-supervisore Federico Masini (entrambi, Università di Roma Sapienza). Da marzo a luglio 2026, *Visiting Ph.D. Student* presso l'Università di Pechino nell'ambito del programma di formazione e ricerca *Xin hanxue jihua*. Membro della European Association of Chinese Linguistics (EACL).