

The Use of DE (的) in Mandarin Chinese

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The morphosyntactic particle DE has long been a subject of investigation in Chinese linguistics. The most salient features of DE are its multifunctionality and optionality. DE mainly functions as a connector between a modifier and its head noun/noun phrase (NP). To date, scholars have not reached agreement on the categorization of functions played by this seemingly simple particle. The literature identifies three major functions of DE: genitive marker, attributive marker, and nominalization marker (Li and Thompson 1981, Yip and Rimmington 2004). Under attributive marker, the modifier can be an adjective/noun, a verb, a phrase, or a relative clause. DE, together with *huà* (话) can also be used to indicate a conditional clause. In addition, there are many cases when DE constructions are immediately followed by a demonstrative or a number+classifier phrase in speech. DE is sometimes obligatory, optional in many cases, and prohibited in idiomatic or lexicalized terms.

Two studies (Chappell and Thompson, 1992; Liu, 2003) have investigated the use and nonuse of DE in Chinese. Both studies concentrate on a particular function of DE (NP1 + (de) + NP2) and only explore the effect of linguistic factors. Adopting the principles of variation analysis, the present study provides a more comprehensive description of how Chinese speakers actually use DE, with all of its linguistic functions as well as social factors of gender and formality taken into consideration. Variation in DE use by twelve speakers in informal interviews is examined and the effects of linguistic functions of DE and gender are explored. Four Chinese teachers' in-class speech and Chinese writings in language textbooks are also examined and compared with informal oral data to test the effect of formality on DE use since classrooms are normally considered to be formal settings.

Frequency analysis shows that DE is always used in conditional clauses and never in lexicalized terms. In contrast to prescriptive claims (e.g. Li and Thompson, 1981), speakers occasionally omit DE from relative clauses. However, teachers and textbooks treat both conditional clauses and relative clauses as DE obligatory environments and lexicalized items as DE prohibited context.

Multivariate analysis of 3,290 optional DE tokens extracted from sociolinguistic interviews with twelve speakers shows that both DE functions and gender are significant, although there is interaction between the two factor groups. The general order of DE function constraints on DE presence is: nominalization marker, relative clause marker > verb-, phrase-as-modifiers > DE constructions followed by demonstrative or number+classifier > genitive marker, adjective/noun-as-modifiers. There is also significant gender difference, with females more likely to use DE than males, but only in two function contexts – genitive marker and DE constructions followed by demonstrative or number+classifier. Finally, comparison results between teachers' in-class speech (2,145 tokens)/textbooks (2,270 tokens) and informal speech show that teachers and textbooks are more likely to use DE than other Chinese speakers, indicating that DE tends to be omitted more in informal speech than in formal situations and writings.

References

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