The Syntactic Functions of the Sentence-final zhe in Sichuan Dialect in China

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Abstract: The sentence-final zhe is widely distributed in modern sinitic dialectal varieties, but has no equivalent in the Putonghua koine. This study thinks that the sentence-final zhe in Nanchong dialect is a subordinating conjunction marking the temporal and conditional clauses, through describing types of meanings, usages and the syntactic functions of zhe in Sichuan dialect of Southwestern Mandarin.

1. Introduction

Zhe can be used at the sentence-final position as a particle in Nanchong dialect, Sichuan province, which usually means “(to do something) first”. For example:

(1) —kɔn55 ƞɔ24 mən yi21 tɛi24 tɛiɛi 24 ɓa
    with we together go SFP
    Will you go there with us?
—nì24 men tsou24 tau24 to
    you walk ASP SFP
You go there first, now.

The usages of zhe, which has not the equivalent form in the Putonghua koine3, distribute widely in modern sinitic dialects, such as Jianghuai Mandarin, Southwestern Mandarin, Northwestern Mandarin, Jin dialect, Xiang dialect and Gan dialect. We believe that the sentence-final zhe has undergone quite a complicated process of changing with historical and dialectal factors, and the data from different Sinitic dialects can help us understand this changing process from a macroscopic perspective. However, few researchers have deeply investigated the sentence-final zhe within Southwestern Mandarin, especially Sichuan dialect. So this paper is to describe the sentence-final zhe in the dialect of Nanchong, Sichuan province, aimed at this gap.

Located between Chengdu and Chongqing, Nanchong is situated in the northeast of Sichuan province and at the middle reaches of Jialing River. The dialectal varieties spoken in most parts of Nanchong belong to the Chengdu-Chongqing dialect of Southwestern Mandarin, and Xichong County administered by Nanchong is the dialectal island of the Guan-chi dialect belonging to Southwestern Mandarin. Besides, hakka are spoken in some villages and towns in Yinong County.

The form zhe at the sentence-final position once appeared in the ancient Chinese koine, but has no similar usage in the the Putonghua koine. It only exists in the modern sinitic dialects, and is still changing differently in different dialectal groups. So detailed descriptions and analysis of zhe in some variety can provide data and cues for further understanding the evolution of linguistic forms. This paper attempts to figure out grammatical nature, meanings and usage of the sentence-final zhe in Nanchong dialect, and to further discuss the changing process of the sentence-final zhe with historical and dialectal data.
We will try to provide a full description of the sentence-final \textit{zhe} in Nanchong dialect from its meanings and usages.

The current researches have provided many controversial discussions on the meanings of the sentence-final. The disagreement on this topic reflects that the evolution of the sentence-final \textit{zhe} is a quite complicated process, so there presents various phenomena or different phases in different sinitic dialects. For example, there is no imperative meaning in Wuhan dialect and in Nanchong dialect. Considering this, we think that it is not acceptable to use the data from one or several dialects to attempt to generalize the fixed types for all dialects, ignoring and excluding the examples form some other dialects, so we discuss the grammatical nature and properties of the sentence-final \textit{zhe} just in Nanchong dialect, avoiding affecting by the presuppositions centered on some dialects.

The current researches on the sentence-final \textit{zhe} generally accept that it means that an event or act should happen earlier than that one mentioned before, and have the discourse meaning similar to the \textit{zaishuo} (to talk about that after a while or next time) at the sentences-final positions.

It is easy to observe that the actions related to \textit{zhe} (\textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} hereafter) are usually related to the other actions or events usually mentioned before(\textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} hereafter), so we identify two basic types of action in Nanchong dialect according to the sequences or relations of the actions as shown in Figure 1. There are two types according to the temporal sequences of the actions. The first type denotes the “\textit{xian} + \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}}” construction. \textit{Zhe} basically means making an event or act have subjective precedence over the other, which can be considered as a usage of action precedence.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{The Types of Action in the Sentences with the Sentence-final \textit{zhe} in Nanchong Dialect}
\end{figure}

The “\textit{xian} (to precede)+\textit{VP}” construction indicates the action related to \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} happen earlier than \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} mentioned before as shown in (1) and (2). Sentence (1) indicates that the \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} “you go there first” happens earlier than \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} “to go there together” in accordance with the speaker’s will, but \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} is laid aside (maybe happens at some unspecified time after the dialogue or never happens).

So it can be seen as an indirect and tactful refusal in some cases from the pragmatic functions.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{zhe} is similar to “until” in English to some extent, and \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} in the sentences of this type has the termination point in the timeline, while \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} has the starting point, which shows that \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} and \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} are both bounded. Sentences (3) expresses \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} “to go to work” should happen after \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} “to go to eat” finishes in the speaker’s subjective willingness. Sentence (10) means that “tomorrow” is the time point when he/she want to go to the supermarket, or just discuss the topic of “going to the supermarket”.
\end{itemize}

We can look at the two types from the perspective of boundedness and unboundness (see Shen 1995). In the type “\textit{xian} + \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}}”, \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} and \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}} are unbounded without the starting point and the termination point, but usually \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}} may happen earlier than \textit{VP\textsubscript{1}}. In the type “\textit{deng} + \textit{VP\textsubscript{zhe}}”,
VP_zhe and VP1 are both bounded: VP_zhe has the termination point, which is the starting point of the
VP1, however, VP_zhe should still happen earlier than VP1. So we think that the two types has no
fundamental difference in expressing the temporal order of actions or events, which constitutes the
usage of action precedence. Yang (2002) and Xing(2004) have the same views on the
meanings of the sentence-final zhe, but differ in naming the term. Yang (2002) thinks that
zhe is a time-precedence particle, while Xing, (2004) use the term “action precedence”. This
paper thinks that zhe expresses the meaning of action precedence, which is a temporal relation.

The “deng + VP_zhe” constructions also can express conditional relations and implies “only if ...”
or “unless...”, which is the conditional usage of the sentence-final zhe. The form zhe is used as a
marker of conditional protasis in some context, and VP_zhe as a conditional adverbial which is the
preconditions of VP1. And sentence (4) means that “you would go there” is a prerequisite for “I will
go there”. In these cases, zhe can express “a provocative call for the consent or support of the
person spoke to (Malmqvist, 1961: 132) ”, and can also express sincerely begging the person spoke
to for permit or support. The from zhe cannot be omitted, because the sentences are not accepted
semantically without the sentence-final zhe and cannot express conditional relations.

(4) min 21 t’ian55 ʨ 21 tuu24 tə 55 iau21 ʨ ɛ24, ni24 ie24 ʨ ɛ24
a. ni24 ʨ ɛ24 to
you   go
Only if you would go there.
b. ni24 ʨ ɛ24 bu21 ʨ ɛ24 to
you go    not    go
Let me know whether you would go there or not first.

Almost all the sentences can add the sentence-final zhe to become the speakers’ preconditions
that must be fulfilled before deciding the event or act in the main clauses, even the interrogative
sentences. These sentences as a whole is the precondition in discussing the topic mentioned in
conditional apodosis. As shown in (4b), “whether you would go there or not” is the minimum
condition of discussing whether I would go or not, which sometimes can be used to give
provocation to the person spoke to.

3. The Syntactic Functions of the Sentence-final zhe

The form zhe used at the sentence-final position, pronouncing [to], basically means “ to do
something or maintain a state first, which would be prior to a particular event, act , or time” and lay
aside the event or act discussed before. The grammar functions and attributes of zhe have a
divergence of views. Many researchers think that the sentence-final zhe in the modern sinitic
dialects is a particle, but little efforts were made to discuss its exact syntactic functions. The
descriptions of dialectal grammar need some linguistic theories, which can be used as the tools to
clearly describe and analyze the dialectal phenomenon from a different view. We argue that zhe is
not an aspect marker or a modal particle as discussed in some of the current researches, but a
subordinating conjunction introducing temporal or conditional clauses in Nanchong dialect, with the
support of the formal syntax.

It is less likely to be the aspect marker in Nanchong dialect for syntactic positions. As (Huang,
Li & Li 2009) points out, the Putonghua koine has two systems for aspect, whose positions are
preverbal and suffixal. So it is obvious that the possible position of the sentence-final zhe as an
aspect marker is located in the post-verbal position. But the sentence-final zhe cannot follow
immediately the main verb: zhe can appear after perfective lau and imperfective tau; can appear
after the Frequency and Duration Phrases located at the post-verbal positions ; can appear after
V+O; zhe is even used after the temporal adverbial

It is salient that the sentence-final zhe can co-occurrence with the aspectual markers, and can
appear after the post-verbal phrases, such as NP describing the frequency or duration of an event,
and even appear after the adverbial. So it is not the aspect marker in Nanchong dialect for it cannot
follow immediately the main verb.
The form zhe functions differently with modal particles in Nanchong dialect. The concept of yuqi which has long been a controversial issue in the study of Chinese grammar is different from the concepts of mood and modality (Zhao & Shi 2011). Wang (1985:160) think that yuqi is “the expressing ways of various emotions”, which is actually equal to tone to express emotions or moods. So the modal particles in the study of Chinese grammar can distinguish sentence types without lexical meanings, and are usually express pragmatic meanings, such as focus and emotion. Besides, some researches from formal syntax can help us understand the grammatical nature of the modal particles in the study of Chinese grammar. The modal particles in Modern Mandarin are only found in the root sentences and cannot appear in embedded clauses, which rule is obeyed in Cantonese (Tang 2010).

Firstly, the sentence-final zhe means “to do something or maintain a state first”, which is different from the modal particles. Secondly, the sentence-final form zhe have different scope from modal particles. Sentences (5) and (6) are good examples to demonstrates the differences between zhe and the modal particle ma嘛(which is equal to ba in the Putonghua koine). Sentence (5a) shows that the modal particle ma嘛 can appear behind zhe, while zhe cannot appear behind ma嘛(cf.(6b)), which shows that the scope of zhe and ma is quite different. Because a modal particle in Chinese are only found in the root sentences to determine sentence types and express emotions at the end of the sentences, its scope covers the whole sentence, no matter how the sentences will be omitted. So if the modal particle ma嘛is located at the end, the sentences are acceptable . Sentence (5b) shows that the scope of the sentence-final zhe is not the whole sentence, but the adverbal clause, because it should immediately follow the temporal adverbal “until tomorrow” in this sentence. If it is realized that the sentence-final zhe is a subordinating conjunction marking the adverbal clauses, (5b) and (6b) are easy to explain: zhe, a subordinating conjunction, cannot govern the scope larger than temporal adverbal, so (15b) and (16b) are not accepted.

(5)ʨ'iɛi 24 tsau 55 si mai 24 tiɛn 24 toŋ 55ʨi bu
go supermarket buy some things not
Do you want to go to the supermarket for shopping?
  a. min 21 t’ian 55 to ma
tomorrow CNJ SFP
  Let’s go till tomorrow. / Let’s talk about that till tomorrow.
  b. * min 21 t’ian 55 tsai 42ʨ'iɛi 24 tsau 55 si to
tomorrow again go supermarket CNJ
  c. min 21 t’ian 55 to, tsai 42ʨ'iɛi 24 tsau 55 si
tomorrow CNJ again go (supermarket)
  Let’s go to (the supermarket) till tomorrow.

(6) a. min 21 t’ian 55 ma
tomorrow SFP
  Tomorrow.
  b. * min 21 t’ian 55 ma to
tomorrow SFP CNJ
  c. min 21 t’ian 55 tsai 42ʨ’ieɪ 24 tsau 55 si ma
tomorrow again go supermarket SFP
  Let’s go to (the supermarket) tomorrow.

We can conclude that zhe is a subordinating conjunction in Nanchong dialect based on the above discussed. With the aid of the formal syntax, description and analysis of the dialectal grammar has new perspective to explore the syntactic nature, and provide a solid foundation for further synchronic and diachronic comparison.

4. Conclusion
In this study, we have provided full descriptions of the sentence-final *zhe* in Sichuan dialect, and have discussed its syntactic functions based on its original character and the types of meaning. The sentence-final *zhe* has two basic types of meaning: *xian + VP* and *deng + VP*, which can express relatively temporal relations. *deng + VP* can also express conditional relations. The sentence-final *zhe* is usually used as a subordinating conjunction introducing temporal or conditional clauses in Sichuan dialect.

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**NOTES**

1. This paper uses “*zhe*” to refer to the form of Chinese character “do” to avoid the possible confusion caused by its different written forms and pronunciations for historical and dialectal factors.

2. Glosses used in this paper include: ASP-aspect; CONJ-conjunction; SFP-sentence final particle; PERF-perfective; PRT-particle.

3. *Putonghua* koine is used to refer to the standard literary and official koine shared by modern Chinese people; “mandarin” is used to refer to mandarin dialects in China.

**References**


