

# 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) —kən<sup>55</sup> ɲo<sup>24</sup> mən      yi<sup>21</sup> tɕ‘i<sup>24</sup>    tɕ‘iei<sup>24</sup>    ba  
     with    we                   together    go                   SFP  
     Will you go there with us?  
—ni<sup>24</sup> mən    tsou<sup>24</sup>    tau<sup>24</sup>    to  
     you       walk    ASP    SFP  
     You go there first, now.

The usages of *zhe*, which has not the equivalent form in the Putonghua 普通话koiné, 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.

## 2. The Sentence-final *Zhe* in Nanchong Dialect

We will try to provide a full description of the sentence-final *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 *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 from some other dialects, so we discuss the grammatical nature and properties of the sentence-final *zhe* just in Nanchong dialect, avoiding affecting by the presuppositions centered on some dialects.

The current researches on the sentence-final *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 *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 *zhe* ( $VP_{zhe}$  hereafter) are usually related to the other actions or events usually mentioned before ( $VP_1$  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 “*xian* +  $VP_{zhe}$ ” construction. *Zhe* basically means making an event or act have subjective precedence over the other, which can be considered as a usage of action precedence.

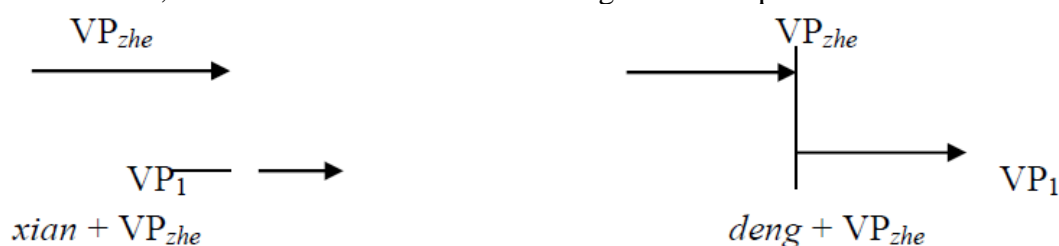


Figure 1. The Types of Action in the Sentences with the Sentence-final *zhe* in Nanchong Dialect

The “*xian* (to precede)+VP” construction indicates the action related to  $VP_{zhe}$  happen earlier than  $VP_1$  mentioned before as shown in (1) and (2). Sentence (1) indicates that the  $VP_{zhe}$  “you go there first” happens earlier than  $VP_1$  “to go there together” in accordance with the speaker’s will, but  $VP_1$  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.

- (2)  $\eta i^{24}$   $\epsilon i e^{21}$   $i^{21}$  xa to.  
 you rest for a while  
 Have a rest first.

The other type “*deng* +  $VP_{zhe}$ ” denotes that  $VP_1$  must happen after the fulfillment or the ending of  $VP_{zhe}$ . This type of constructions usually contain *deng*等 (to wait, a verb that can also be used to express permit in Nanchong dialect) or can be translated into the construction of “wait...until” in Nanchong dialect. So *zhe* is similar to “until” in English to some extent, and  $VP_{zhe}$  in the sentences of this type has the termination point in the timeline, while  $VP_1$  has the starting point, which shows that  $VP_{zhe}$  and  $VP_1$  are both bounded. Sentences (3) expresses  $VP_1$  “to go to work” should happen after  $VP_{zhe}$  “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”.

- (3) ts’i<sup>21</sup> lau fan<sup>42</sup> to tsai<sup>42</sup> tɕ’iei<sup>24</sup> koŋ<sup>55</sup> tso<sup>21</sup>  
 eat PERF rice SPF again go work  
 Go to eat before work.

We can look at the two types from the perspective of boundedness and unboundedness (see Shen 1995). In the type “*xian* +  $VP_{zhe}$ ”,  $VP_{zhe}$  and  $VP_1$  are unbounded without the starting point and the termination point, but usually  $VP_{zhe}$  may happen earlier than  $VP_1$ . In the type “*deng* +  $VP_{zhe}$ ”,

VP<sub>zhe</sub> and VP1 are both bounded: VP<sub>zhe</sub> has the termination point, which is the starting point of the VP1, however, VP<sub>zhe</sub> 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<sub>zhe</sub>” 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<sub>zhe</sub>, 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<sup>21</sup> t'ian<sup>55</sup> tɛ'uan<sup>21</sup> tsu<sup>24</sup> tɔu<sup>55</sup> iau<sup>21</sup> tɛ'iei<sup>24</sup>, ni<sup>24</sup> ie<sup>24</sup> tɛ'iei<sup>24</sup>

a. ni<sup>24</sup> tɛ'iei<sup>24</sup> to

you go

Only if you would go there.

b. ni<sup>24</sup> tɛ'iei<sup>24</sup> bu<sup>21</sup> tɛ'iei<sup>24</sup> 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 maker 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 adverbial clause, because it should immediately follow the temporal adverbial “until tomorrow” in this sentence. If it is realized that the sentence-final *zhe* is a subordinating conjunction marking the adverbial clauses, (5b) and (6b) are easy to explain: *zhe*, a subordinating conjunction, cannot govern the scope larger than temporal adverbial, so (15b) and (16b) are not accepted.

- (5)  $\text{tɕ'iei}^{24}$   $\text{tsau}^{55}\text{si}$   $\text{mai}^{24}$   $\text{tʰien}^{24}$   $\text{toŋ}^{55}$   $\text{tɕi}$   $\text{bu}$   
 go supermarket buy some things not  
 Do you want to go to the supermarket for shopping?
- a.  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{to}$   $\text{ma}$   
 tomorrow CNJ SFP  
 Let's go till tomorrow. / Let's talk about that till tomorrow.
- b. \*  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{tsai}^{42}$   $\text{tɕ'iei}^{24}$   $\text{tsau}^{55}$   $\text{si}$   $\text{to}$   
 tomorrow again go supermarket CNJ
- c.  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{to}$ ,  $\text{tsai}^{42}$   $\text{tɕ'iei}^{24}$   $\text{tsau}^{55}$   $\text{si}$   
 tomorrow CNJ again go (supermarket)  
 Let's go to (the supermarket) till tomorrow.
- (6) a.  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{ma}$   
 tomorrow SFP  
 Tomorrow.
- b. \*  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{ma}$   $\text{to}$   
 tomorrow SFP CNJ
- c.  $\text{min}^{21}$   $\text{t'ian}^{55}$   $\text{tsai}^{42}$   $\text{tɕ'iei}^{24}$   $\text{tsau}^{55}$   $\text{si}$   $\text{ma}$   
 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<sub>*zhe*</sub> and *deng* + VP<sub>*zhe*</sub>, which can express relatively temporal relations. *deng* + VP<sub>*zhe*</sub> 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.

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