

On the Semantic Cognition of the Emerging Construction “X *Zhu Le*”—From Grammatical Construction to Rhetorical Construction

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The present paper discusses the semantic cognition of the emerging Chinese construction “X *zhu le* (住了)” from grammatical to rhetorical construction. It is found that “zhu” within this construction undergoes the transition from indicating “firmness” and “pause” to a more abstract state, highlighting the richness of “X”. In addition, this construction, affected by both internal and external linguistic factors, shows a trend of colloquialization and visualization.

Keywords: “X *zhu le*” (X住了), grammatical construction, rhetorical construction

Introduction

Construction is the “pairing of form and meaning” or “pairing of form and functions” (Goldberg, 1995; Jackendoff, 1997; Kay & Fillmore, 1999). This implies that all constructions, whether simple or complex, have their own independent forms, meanings, or functions. Any linguistic expression can be called a construction if some aspect of its forms, meanings, or functions is unpredictable. Linguists have engaged in the study of constructions from various perspectives, such as Wang (2009), who differentiated grammatical constructions and rhetorical constructions by exploring the manifestations of unpredictability in language. Liu (2010a) argued that although basic constructions are typically derivable, some may appear to be non-derivable in specific situations, resulting in rhetorical constructions, which reflects the diversity and variability of languages. Lu (2016) explored the evolutionary process from grammar to rhetoric to new grammatical constructs. However, there are few studies on these emerging grammatical constructions.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the evolution of “X *zhu le*” from grammatical to rhetorical construction and its application based on the observation of examples extracted from corpora and social media platforms, including Center for Chinese Linguistics Peking University (CCL), BLCU Corpus Center (BCC), Sina Weibo, Little Red Book, and Thepaper.cn.

Characteristics of the Emerging Construction “X *Zhu Le*”

The polysemy of “X *zhu le*” endows it with rich and complex senses. The verb “zhu”, when functioning as a resultative complement, extends beyond merely depicting a simple behavioral result, containing symbolic and

abstract meanings. In literary works, this construction is used to depict the subtle changes of the mood of the characters, reveal the turning point and development of the plot, or reflect the change and continuation of the social style. In *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (7th edition), “*zhu*” is defined as follows:

- (1) 长期居留或短暂歇息: 居住, 住房.
- (2) 停, 止, 歇下: 住手, 雨住了.
- (3) 动词的补语:
 - a. 表示稳当或牢固, 如 “站住”;
 - b. 表示停顿或静止, 如 “他愣住了”;
 - c. 与 “得” 或 “不” 连用, 表示力量够得上, 如 “支持不住了” (Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2016, p. 1703).

In practice, however, this construction goes beyond its literal sense to a more abstract and metaphorical level, used as a metaphor for the change and stability of time, space, or emotional state. It can express the turmoil and calm of characters' inner emotions, for instance:

- (1) 电影《了不起的夜晚》首映现场, 范丞丞突然被cue表演《仙儿》, 害羞住了。(Sina Weibo, April 3, 2023)

“*Zhu*” in Example (1) becomes grammaticalized. It is used to express the inner emotional attitude of the speaker, the dynamic continuation of the action. The meaning extension of the construction “X *zhu le*” provides an important tool for the richness and flexibility of Chinese. It is not only a form of language expression, but also a carrier of culture, history, and emotion. In daily life and literary creation, people use it to construct stories, convey emotions, and express feelings, thus enriching the connotation and expressiveness of Chinese.

At the syntactic level, there is a specific semantic relationship between “X” and other components, involving subject-verb relationship, verb-object relationship, etc. “X” in the construction also plays a specific semantic role, which can be a verb expressing behavior or an adjective describing state. When “X” is a verb, “X *zhu le*” can be used in the following three situations: First, “*zhu le*” is the behavioral complement of the verb X to indicate the actual result of the action behavior, such as “*na zhu le* (拿住了) (meaning took hold of)”, “*zhua zhu le* (抓住了) (meaning seized)”, “*zhan zhu le* (站住了) (meaning stood still)”, and so on. Second, “X *zhu le*” is in the transition stage from grammatical construction to rhetorical construction. At this stage, there are two interpretations of the construction, and its specific connotation is context-dependent. For instance: “允浩抬头瞪大眼睛! 惊讶住了: 哇噢~” (Sina Weibo, January 11, 2024). Third, the meaning of “*zhu*” has been completely grammaticalized, its grammatical function being highlighted. A distinctive characteristic of this type of “X” is that it no longer focuses on the expression of actions, but on behavioral changes. For example:

- (2) 一整个弱小可怜无助但是很讲礼貌「不要这样」「干什么」被迫丽热巴可爱住了 (Sina Weibo, April 25, 2024).

Compared with the verb, the adjective “X” more or less expresses the preference of likes and dislikes, mixed with people's subjective emotions, both positive or negative. Therefore, it naturally has the semantic characteristics of subjective psychological tendencies. For example:

- (3) 很久之前刘亦菲的活动照片, 一整个被清纯住了 (Sina Weibo, June 12, 2022).

In conclusion, the polysemy of “X *zhu le*” and its rich applications in language, culture and emotion highlight the flexibility of this construction.

“X *Zhu Le*” From Grammatical Construction to Rhetorical Construction

Extension of “X”

The “X *zhu le*” construction shows a rich evolution in its grammatical and rhetorical construction. First, in this grammatical construction, the variable “X” is in most cases a verb. However, not all verbs can be used in this construction. According to Fan (2008), 13 types of verbs cannot enter the construction “X *zhu*”, namely: relative verbs, verbs of will and mental activity, existential verbs, directional verbs, resultative compound verbs, compound directional verbs, V-O compound verbs, formal verbs, interactive verbs, verbs that are homomorphic with prepositions, stative verbs and instantaneous verbs, persistent verbs, and displacement verbs for results. But in the rhetorical construction “X *zhu le*”, the variant “X” can be used to indicate a mental state, here are several examples:

(4) 这个词好，朴实，亲切听得我鸡皮疙瘩一阵一阵的，真能唱出那份痛楚嘢小哥一开口就把我震慑住了，要爱得多深才能唱得出这份悲伤彪悍的人生。(BCC)

(5) 他话音刚落，整个包厢突然静了下来。夏娜好奇的点着头，心想原来还可以有这样的爱好。而威尔艾米娜则像被点了穴似的僵住了。(BCC)

Second, Fan (2008) argued that resultative complements are usually used to express the results of actions and states, while their declarative components are mainly composed of verbs. In the case of the fictionalized complement “*zhu*”, adjectives may also appear before it, although this is relatively rare. Fan found that there are only very few four adjectives that can be matched in the construction “A *zhu*”, including “难”, “呆”, “傻”, “稳”, etc. Therefore, from the point of view of the grammatical construction “X *zhu le*”, the choice of adjectives is limited, and only these four adjectives can be applied. However, when it comes to the rhetorical construction “X *zhu le*”, the variant “X” can provide a wider choice of adjectives, for example:

(6) 一整个浪漫住了，拿捏氛围感还得看这段。(Sina Weibo, August 18, 2022)

(7) 幸福住了，他竟然让我在家里泡到了温泉。(Little Red Book, November 8, 2022)

Grammaticalization of “*Zhu*”

In its historical evolution, “*zhu*” was initially used as a verb and conveyed the meaning of “to stop”. However, over time, especially in the Middle Ages, “*zhu*” began to show a tendency towards grammaticalization. This means that its meaning has the tendency to generalization and is no longer limited to the literal meaning “pause” or “stillness”, but begins to involve more abstract concepts. In modern Chinese, “*zhu*” in the construction “X *zhu le*” is not only a verb, but also a part of rhetorical construction, serving as an emphasizing, modifying, or evaluating function. For example:

(8) 今天，我们被捐赠人狠狠感动住了。(Thepaper.cn, September 15, 2022)

(9) 送别袁老，看到这一幕眼泪又绷不住了……铭记，他曾对我们说过这些话。(Thepaper.cn, May 23, 2021)

Semantic Changes of “了”

In the grammatical construction “X *zhu le*”, “X” and “*zhu*” are more closely paired, while the collocation between “*le*” and “X *zhu*” is relatively flexible. “*Le*” can be used not only as a dynamic particle in a sentence, but also as a modal particle at the end of a sentence. However, in the rhetorical construction, “*le*” and “*zhu*” are more closely matched; it can only serve as a dynamic particle and modal at the end of the sentence. The omission of this character would result in an incomplete sentence that would not be self-contained. This difference not only highlights the more emphatic and precise use of “*le*” in rhetorical constructions, but also the subtle

differences between grammar and rhetoric in terms of construction and tone. For example:

(10) 什么, 阿土, 你也要量米吃了? (CCL)

(11) 白芸被这事惊喜住了。(CCL)

Cliticization of Fixed Constituents

When “X” is a verb, “zhu” as the state complement of the verb belongs to the typical construction “X zhu le”. The combination of the verb “X” and “zhu” tends to be used more frequently, and contemporary Chinese has produced many versatile or flexible words and phrases, some of which are even included in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, such as “抓住、盯住、记住”, etc. In 2011, “X zhu” was used as a verb and as the complement of a verb, expanding its original grammatical role for the first time and resulting in the term “hold zhu”. On this basis, “X” and “zhu” in “X zhu le” have been gradually generalized and grammaticalized, and this combination has been gradually lexicalized, and the function of “zhu” has also changed. For example:

(12) 七个上阿妈的孩子都过来围住了他。(BBC)

(13) 就这个花絮来看成片很难翻车, 期待住了。(Sina Weibo, May 2, 2024)

Verbalization and Visualization

The word “zhu” in “X zhu le” is colloquial and rarely appears in written language, mostly expressing subjective emotions or judgments. The humor of the language makes the event described in “X” more vivid and engaging. For example:

(14) A: 你确定你的语气不是在质疑我的歌声?

B: 哇秀住了, 秀住了, 太好看了, 嘻嘻真的很满意!! (BCC)

(15) 完全震撼住了, 被不见天日的事实也被勇敢震撼。(Sina Weibo, May 4, 2023)

Factors Influencing the Emergence of the Construction “X Zhu Le”

Construction Coercion

Construction coercion is a phenomenon that plays a key role in the structural meaning and usage of an utterance and leads to appropriate adjustments to other components of the discourse. It acts on and influences the generation of new rhetorical constructions, in which the subjective polarity degree meaning of “X” breaks through the constraints of the constructions, so that the variant “X” is no longer bound by the syntactic features that contradict “X zhu le”, and can thus appear in this construction. Also, construction coercion drives the continuous analogy of this emerging construction and is widely spread in communication.

Language Economy Principle

The language economy principle means that the least amount of language is used to express the maximum amount of information. “X zhu le” reflects the speaker’s grasp of language, which requires the ability to mobilize more implicit information to understand for the hearer, the language economy principle depends on the implicit information. For example:

(16) “园区收留的流浪狗小黑, 还给配了制服, 一整个被可爱住了”(Sina Weibo, November 16, 2023).

In this sentence, the object of “可爱住了” is not explicitly referred to, but the listener is able to understand it due to the fact that the specific context has already been given an explicit object of reference, so they can accurately understand that “可爱住了” refers to “小黑”. Therefore, in this context, the listener needs to continue to ask questions in order to get a correct understanding of the discourse.

The Mentality of Seeking Novelty and Difference

The progress of the internet has facilitated the widespread adoption of “X *zhu le*”, which caters to the psychological penchant for novelty and difference. This linguistic construction is deeply entrenched in the culture of online media and accentuates the contextual nature of the event denoted by “X”, thereby rendering the portrayal of dynamic changes with vividness. Although the construction maintains its original function of indicating an action or state, people can discern the underlying meaning even from the unfamiliar expression, endowing it with the qualities of dual interpretation and the elision of the explicit object.

Conclusion

The evolution of “X *zhu le*” from grammatical to rhetorical construction is driven by both internal linguistic factors (like coercion and language economy) and external factors (such as cyber culture and psychology). This study delves into the semantic and cognitive changes of this emerging construction. It identifies the characteristics of “X *zhu le*” and conditions for “X” as verbs or adjectives. Comparing grammatical and rhetorical aspects, it notes the expanded lexical scope of “X”, especially with psychoactive verbs and more adjectives, enhancing the construction’s expressiveness. This study also examines the grammaticalization of “*zhu*”, changes in “*le*” usage, and the construction’s cliticization, verbalization, and visualization, underscoring its semantic flexibility and diversity. Overall, analyzing “X *zhu le*” helps understand its online popularity and offers insights for linguistic studies, showcasing language’s richness and variability.

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