FUNCTIONAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN ZAI (在) AND ZHENGZAI (正在) IN MANDARIN
Evidence from Collocations

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Abstract

Both zai and zhengzai are progressive markers in Mandarin Chinese, and by the principle of economy, there should be some differences in these two progressive markers. With the Sinica Corpus on-line tools, a significant difference is found in the collocation of adverbial adjuncts with the use of zai and zhengzai. This paper discusses three types of adverbials to distinguish these two markers: modality adverbs, time adverbs, and manner adverbs. Zhengzai cannot co-occur with [+iterative] adverbs and adverbs without a specific time reference. It mainly indicates the progression of an on-going event at a given specific time point. On the other hand, zai not only indicates the on-going process but can also signal the progression of repeated event as habitual-progressive.

1 Introduction

In Mandarin Chinese, both zai and zhengzai are progressive markers which present an internal interval of a durative situation, and often have the connotations of activity and temporary imperfectivity associated with non-statives [3]. But, when talking about imperfective aspect markers in Mandarin Chinese, most studies just represent zai as a progressive marker ([2], [5], [6], [7], [11], [17], and [18]), while fewer studies indicate that there are other representations of progressive markers ([3], [4], and [15]). Although mentioning both zai and zhengzai as progressive markers, previous studies treat them almost as interchangeable and only focus on the discussion of zai with few detailed distinction between these two forms. Given that these two markers are morphologically distinct, some questions will have to be asked: do they encode the same grammatical, semantic and pragmatic information? Do they occur in completely the same contexts or they have different contextual constraints? If the two markers are functionally identical, we may wonder why Chinese has two different and redundant progressive representations. Given the principle of economy in language, our assumption is that there must be some fine-grained distinctions between zai and zhengzai. In this paper, we adopt a corpus-based approach, since corpus data provide a wealth of grammatical associations that may help delimit the key semantic distinctions, as successfully shown in recent studies on lexical semantics (cf. [9], [13], and [14]). This paper thus aims to explore the semantic distinction between zai and zhengzai by examining their collocational patterns in discourse.

2 Methodology

Most of our data come from the Sinica Corpus. Since zai has a variety of senses, we only look at the instances of zai that are compatible with zhengzai as aspectual markers. As a result, there are 2000 utterances with zai and 696 utterances with zhengzai.

With the searching tools and POS tags in Sinica Corpus, we can readily retrieve the frequency counts of neighboring categories which precede or follow zai and zhengzai for further analysis.

3 Finding and Discussion

The data in Sinica Corpus reveal that the top ten grammatical categories before and after zai and zhengzai do vary, as shown in Tables 1a, 1b and 2a, 2b.

Table 1a. Top-10 Categories before zai
| 類 | 左 5 | 左 4 | 左 3 | 左 2 | 左 1 | 合計 | 比例 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Na | 303 | 304 | 285 | 338 | 413 | 1643 | 17.31 |
| D | 179 | 161 | 177 | 260 | 748 | 1525 | 16.06 |
| ‡ | 220 | 227 | 254 | 213 | 98 | 1012 | 10.66 |
| Nh | 83 | 97 | 106 | 177 | 246 | 709 | 7.47 |
| VH | 94 | 92 | 82 | 71 | 38 | 377 | 3.97 |
| Nf | 61 | 67 | 68 | 98 | 18 | 312 | 3.29 |
| SHI | 25 | 31 | 38 | 63 | 134 | 291 | 3.07 |
| VE | 75 | 54 | 58 | 59 | 5 | 251 | 2.64 |
| Nc | 45 | 67 | 47 | 51 | 28 | 238 | 2.51 |
| † | 50 | 68 | 55 | 38 | 25 | 236 | 2.49 |

Table 1b. Top-10 Categories after zai

| 類 | 右 1 | 右 2 | 右 3 | 右 4 | 右 5 | 合計 | 比例 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Na | 20 | 333 | 270 | 299 | 304 | 1226 | 12.86 |
| VC | 762 | 91 | 78 | 68 | 94 | 1093 | 11.46 |
| ‡ | 3 | 389 | 295 | 147 | 153 | 987 | 10.35 |
| D | 71 | 35 | 121 | 238 | 239 | 704 | 7.38 |
| VA | 353 | 31 | 37 | 34 | 43 | 498 | 5.22 |
| Nh | 4 | 153 | 103 | 110 | 102 | 472 | 4.95 |
| VE | 282 | 30 | 33 | 47 | 61 | 453 | 4.75 |
| VH | 142 | 57 | 77 | 85 | 90 | 451 | 4.73 |
| † | 1 | 121 | 137 | 68 | 47 | 374 | 3.92 |
| Nep | 3 | 116 | 36 | 44 | 27 | 226 | 2.37 |

Table 2a. Top-10 Category before zhengzai

| 類 | 左 5 | 左 4 | 左 3 | 左 2 | 左 1 | 合計 | 比例 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Na | 107 | 102 | 113 | 124 | 204 | 650 | 19.85 |
| ‡ | 54 | 62 | 77 | 117 | 70 | 380 | 11.61 |
| D | 51 | 43 | 34 | 26 | 59 | 213 | 6.51 |
| Nc | 25 | 36 | 46 | 42 | 63 | 212 | 6.48 |
| Nh | 20 | 19 | 23 | 13 | 88 | 163 | 4.98 |
The result shows that although there is no significant distinction in the categories after \( zai \) and \( zhengzai \) from figure 1b and 2b, there are indeed differences in the categories before the two markers as shown in Tables 1a and 2a. The three categories commonly found after \( zai \) and \( zhengzai \) are the same and their percentages are close—no more than five percent. On the other hand, from Tables 1a and 2a, we found an interesting difference in the preceding positions. The three higher-frequency categories preceding the two markers are categorically the same but with different rankings, among which adverbs show a significant distinction. Adverbs preceding \( zai \) is 10 percent more than that of \( zhengzai \). It may suggest that adverbs could be an important indicator to distinguish \( zai \) and \( zhengzai \). In the following, we mainly focus on three types of adverbs to characterize their relations with \( zai \) and \( zhengzai \): modality adverbs, time adverbs, and manner adverbs.

Both \( zai \) and \( zhengzai \) can occur with modality adverbs such as \( yiding \) (一定), \( keneng \) (可能), \( yexu \) (也许), \( haoxiang \) (好像), and so on.

(1) 他 可能 在 躲避 什麼
ta keneng zai duobi shene
“He is possibly avoiding something.”

(2) 她 想 了一下, 似乎 在 找 台詞
ta xiangle yiixia shi zai zhao taici
“She thought for a while, seemingly to be searching what to say.”

(3) 他的 手 可能 正在 摸 黑黑 的 機油
His hands may be groping in the dark the black engine oil."

"The technical rebound seems to be fermenting."

However, when the modality adverb contains the feature [+ iterative], indicating a repetition or recurrence of an event, such as you (又) and zai (再) [6], the marker zhengzai is not allowed to co-occur.

"Really? You are deceiving people again."
With frequency adverbs such as changchang (常常), zhongshi (总是) and aspectuality adverbs as luxu (陆续), buduan (不断), zhengzai are NOT allowed to appear, either, since these frequency adverbs signal a progressive aspect in the habitual sense, i.e. without a specific time reference [16] or indicate repetitive-progressive that extends over an unspecified period of time.

(12) frequency adverbs
基金會 也 常常 在/*正在 廣告 大腸癌，
jijihui ye changchang zai/*zhengzai guanggao dachangai
foundation also often ZAI/*ZENGZAI advertise Colon Cancer
“Foundation is also often advertising Colon Cancer.”

(13) aspectuality adverbs
目前 全國 各 運動 單項 協會 陸續 在/*正在 召開
Muania quanguo ge yundong单项协会陆续在/*正在召开
general meeting hold on supervisor and director re-election
“Currently each national association of single-item exercise is continuously holding the general meeting to carry on the re-election of the supervisor and the director.”

The shorter form zai can co-occur with the above frequency adverbs, since it is compatible with the feature [+iterative] in that the progressive event can be repetitive. It not only represents simple progressive as an on-going event but can also signal habitual-progressive with the use of durational adverbs.

With regard to manner adverbs, both zai and zhengzai may occur with a variety of manner adverbs. But, there is a significant constraint in terms of the position of the manner adverb. Zhengzai cannot take a preceding manner adverb as shown in (14), while zai can occur both with preceding and following manner adverbs as (14) and (15).

(14) 畫家 悠閒地 在/*正在 寫生
huajia youxiandi zai/*zhengzai xiesheng
draw leisurely and carefree ZAI/*ZENGZAI draw from nature
“The painter is leisurely and carefree drawing from nature”

b. 聽見 小雞 正在 啼叫的 吵鬧
tingjian xiaji zhengzai jijide chaunau
hear chicken ZHENGZAI peep make noise
“Hears the chicken is peeping and making noise.”

Manner adverbs typically characterize the way or means the event is carried out. Since zhengzai signals the overlapping of an on-going event with a specific time point, which, when substantiated, is supposed take up the slot immediately preceding zhengzai. Thus, a manner adverb cannot take the pre-aspectual position that may be occupied by a time reference. It then ended up only in the post-aspectual position immediately preceding the verb, a slot that will not block the expression of reference time. On the other hand, zai is free from a specified time reference and may take a pre- or post-aspectual manner adverb. But the scope of modification differs with different positions of manner adjuncts. When a manner adjunct occurs after zai and immediately before the verb, it is event-internal, modifying the single instance of the predicated event. However, when a manner adjunct occurs before zai, it is event-external, modifying the relation of the predicated event with some other constituent.

In sum, zhengzai requires a time reference, indicating the on-going process pertaining to a specific time point. It is a semantically and pragmatically stronger form to represent progressive event [8]. It cannot be used to express repetitive-progressive (He is repetitively hitting the ball), continuous-progressive (He continued hitting the ball) or habitual progressive (He is always hitting the ball). But zai can occur with [+iterative] and [-iterative] events without a specified time reference. The distinction between them is that zhengzai only indicates deictic progressive (tensed aspect), while
zai is compatible with other types of progressives.

4 Conclusion

This paper discusses the distinction between zai and zhengzai with evidence from their collocational patterns. It is found that the use of adverbial adjuncts with zai and zhengzai represents a significance difference. Zhengzai is more constrained in semantic and pragmatic specifications. It cannot co-occur with [+iterative] adverbials indicating repetition of an event or adverbials without a specific time reference. Zhengzai indicates an on-going progressive event at a specific time, signaling temporally deictic aspectuality. On the other hand, zai is less restricted in marking all kinds of progressive perspective.

In Chinese, there are other markers which can also indicate the progressive or imperfective aspect, such as zheng (正) or zhe (著). Thus, in further studies, we can compare zai, zhengzai and other progressive markers to come to a complete picture of the imperfective marking system. In addition, this paper does not exhaust all types of adverbial collocations. There are other types of adverbs which do not collocate with zhengzai, such as negative adverbs. It can be reserved for a follow-up study in the future. Moreover, discourse-level constraints on the use of the two markers would be another interesting area to look further into.
[19] Yi-fen Luo. *Imperfective Aspect Marker "Zai","Zhe" In Mandarin Chinese: A New Look At An Old Problem* (論漢語未完成態動詞"在"與"著"). MA dissertation, NTHU, 1995.

**Web Resource**

Sinica Corpus: http://www.sinica.edu.tw/ftms-bin/kiwi1/mkiwish