Multiple sources in the emergence of Mandarin [bi N hai N] comparative constructions

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This paper focuses on two unconventional comparative constructions in Mandarin: [bi N_i hai N_i] and [bi N_i hai N_j], as exemplified in (1) and (2):

(1) 我这心里比阳光还阳光!

Wo	*zhe*	*xinli*	***bi***	***yangguang***	***hai***	***yangguang!*** (BCC)
I	this	heart.in	BI	sunshine	HAI	sunshine!
COMPAREE			COMPARATIVE MARKER	STANDARD OF COMPARISON	DEGREE ADVERB	DIMENSION OF COMPARISON

'My heart is even more sunny than the sun!'

(2) 真是天才，比白痴还天才!

Zhen	*shi*	*tiancai,*	***bi***	***baizhi***	***hai***	***tiancai.***
Really	is	genius,	**BI**	**idiot**	**HAI**	**genius.**

'What a genius, an even better genius than the idiots.'

They are unconventional in that the item expressing the dimension along which the comparison is made (i.e., the second occurrence of *yangguang* in (1), *tiancai* in (2)) is a Noun rather than an adjective/predicate expressing gradability. In (1), the nouns expressing the dimension-of-comparison and the standard-of-comparison are formally identical; in (2), they are different.

Filling a gap in previous studies (e.g., Yang, 2011; Cheng, 2013), the present study – which is couched within a Diachronic Construction Grammar framework – centers on the emergence of [bi N_i hai N_i] and [bi N_i hai N_j] as well as their underlying mechanisms. It draws on a quantitative analysis of corpus data taken from the BCC corpus.

We contend that the [bi N_i hai N_i] construction emerges by analogy from the conventional comparative construction [bi N hai A], which conveys that, compared to a standard-of-comparison (N), a comparee takes an even higher position on a scale expressed by A. Through analogical reasoning, speakers then transfer this meaning to a formally similar structure with, in its dimension-of-comparison slot, a Noun that is identical to the Noun in the standard-of-comparison slot. The adoption of the scalar meaning of A by a N, which is in essence non-scalar, can be viewed as coercion (Lauwers & Willems, 2011). What motivates this coercion is the Noun's metonymic shift from 'entity' to 'entity's attributes. What may further have facilitated the extension from [bi N hai A] to [bi N_i hai N_i] is that the latter may have inherited the nominal feature from an already existent construction [adverb N]. A collexeme analysis we carried out indicates that the nouns most significantly attracted to [adverb N], and to [bi N_i hai N_i] are semantically similar. At a more schematic level, the extension A > N observed in [bi N hai A] > [bi N_i hai N_i] may be modeled (formally and semantically) on the existing development in Mandarin from [adverb A] to [adverb N]; this is a shift-cum-coercion from scalar Adjective > Noun when preceded by

an adverb denoting intensification (e.g., ‘too’, ‘very’).

Analogical extension and inheritance also underlie the subsequent development from [bi N_i hai N_i] (and indirectly also from [bi N hai A]) to [bi N_i hai N_j].

Importantly, the analogical relations (or links) between [bi N hai A], [bi N_i hai N_i], and [bi Ni hai N_j], as well as those between [adverb A] > [adverb N] hold in the horizontal dimension of the constructional network, as illustrated in Figure 1. This study thus illustrates that, contra Goldberg (1995), constructions need not be related taxonomically for a construction to motivate another. That is, it corroborates the view that lateral relations also play an important role in language change (see Zehentner & Traugott 2020: 174). Moreover, we argue that at the origin of [bi N hai N] lie multiple sources: [bi N hai A], [adverb N], and the development [adverb A] > [adverb N].

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The corpus exploited:

The corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University Corpus Center (BCC), which includes nearly 15 billion Chinese characters; its website is as follows: http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn

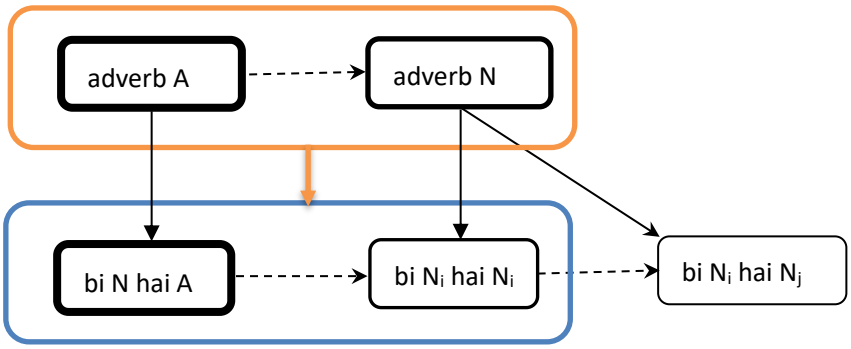

Figure 1 The constuctional network of [bi N hai N]