

**The emergence of *zeonhang* as a progressive marker  
in Hong Kong written Chinese -  
and its typological comparison with Dutch *aan het*-construction**

Oral/Poster

Chinese has long been known as a language having a relatively rich repository of aspect markers. In Hong Kong written Chinese (HKWC), *zoi* 'at' and *zingzoi* 'right at'<sup>1</sup> are the markers that are most commonly used for expressing the progressive aspect. However, it is recently discovered that the lexical verb *zeonhang* '(be) in progress' is becoming more versatile and is increasingly used as a progressive marker, as shown in the following example.

*GwokTaai honghung zingsat , ceotsi feigei zoi zeonhang*  
Cathay.Pacific airlines confirm accident plane at- PROG

*cenggit si, waattai dat bei kaidung .*  
clean -time evacuation.slide suddenly PASS activate

'Cathay Pacific Airlines confirms that when the plane which had the accident was being cleaned, the evacuation slides were suddenly activated.'

(*Sharp Daily*, 05/10/2012)

From a synchronic perspective, this paper examines the degree of grammaticalization of *zeonhang* by identifying the perceived preferences and constraints of the marker by native users of HKWC. An acceptability judgment task, based on the model of Flecken (2011) on the grammaticalizing Dutch *aan het*-construction, was administered to 121 participants. Results show that *zeonhang* is anchored mainly in here-and-now contexts and is most compatible with dynamic predicates. Also, the thematic role of the subject is found to be the most determining variable for the adoption of *zeonhang*, in which subject as patient is highly favorable for the marker. This can be attributed to the semantic retention of the lexical origin of *zeonhang*, as well as the topic-prominent property of Chinese. For age-related differences, the middle group (20-30 years old) is discovered to be least likely to apply *zeonhang*.

Though Dutch and Chinese are languages which are typologically distant from each other, a comparison of the results between the Dutch study (Flecken, 2011) and the present one reveals similarities in their contexts for the grammaticalization of progressive markers: In terms of temporal contexts and situation types, the acceptability ranking of *aan het* and *zeonhang* are alike.

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<sup>1</sup> *zoi* and *zingzoi* are pronounced as *zai* and *zhengzai* in Mandarin.

Consistent with the findings of previous studies (cf. Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca, 1994; Comrie, 1976), this paper shows that there are some language-universal criteria for the development of progressive aspect markers in different languages, even if these languages are from distinct language families.

**References:**

Bybee, Joan, Perkins, Revere, & Pagliuca, William (1994). *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comrie, Bernard (1976). *Aspect : an introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flecken, Monique (2011). What native speaker judgments tell us about the grammaticalization of a progressive aspectual marker in Dutch. *Linguistics*, 49(3), 479-524.