

The Development of Multifunctional Structure “X Shang Jia X” in Chinese: A Diachronic Constructionist Approach

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The Chinese structure known as “X shang jia X” is a versatile and commonly used construction, such as “nan shang jia nan.” By conducting a detailed analysis of its syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features from a synchronic viewpoint, the article also reviews the diachronic development of this construction through the lens of Constructionalization Theory. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows: N shang V (O) (ancient China) → N₁ shang jia N₂ (Southern Song Dynasty) → N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂ (Yuan Dynasty) → N shang jia N (Ming Dynasty) → A shang jia A and V shang jia V (Ming Dynasty) → X shang jia X (Qing Dynasty and Republic of China). The motivation behind the evolution of “X shang jia X” can be succinctly described as the desire to achieve cadence and rhythm, to adapt to specific contexts, and to fulfill expressive needs. The mechanism that significantly contributes to the process of “X shang jia X” can be summarized as the replication of variables and the analogization process.

Keywords: X shang jia X, construction, Constructionalization, diachronic study, motivation, mechanism

In contemporary Chinese, a frequently used construction known as “X shang jia X” (X 上加 X) exists. The “X” in this construction can represent a noun, an adjective, or a verb. The construction itself conveys the notion of “adding X to X,” as exemplified by the phrase “nan shang jia nan” (难上加难), which is literally translated into “adding difficulty to difficulty.” For example:

Example 1¹

讲师升副教授容易，副教授升教授难上加难。
(钱锺书《围城》)

Jiang shi sheng fu jiao shou rong yi, fu jiao shou sheng jiao shou nan shang jia nan.

Lecture promote associate professor easy, associate professor promote professor add difficulty to difficulty.

It is easy for a lecturer to become an associate professor, but it is extremely difficult for an associate professor to become a professor.

(Zhongshu Qian, *Fortress Besieged*)

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The word “nan shang jia nan” in the sentence is used to convey a high level of difficulty. This expression is employed to emphasize the extent of the challenge. From a syntactic perspective, “X shang jia X” is an abstract schematic construction (Fillmore et al., 1988). This construction consists of the constant words “shang” (top) and “jia” (add), along with the variable word “X.” Semantically, “X shang jia X” has multiple meanings, encompassing both the concept of

¹ In the given sentence, certain parts of the speech are represented by abbreviations such as “attributive marker” (AM), “auxiliary word” (AW), and “modal particle” (MP).

composition and additional connotations beyond composition. As a result, “X shang jia X” can be classified as a typical construction (Goldberg, 1995).

Despite its prevalence, the academic community has largely overlooked this particular construction. A review of periodical literature reveals that research pertaining to this construction primarily centers around two key areas: the examination of Chinese reduplicative forms (Chang, 2007; Li, 1996; Tao, 2012) and the exploration of constructions associated with the category of quantity (Dai, 2016; Wang, 2012; Zhen, 2015). No scholars have conducted a specific study on this construction, and most of them simply considered it as an idiom.

The examination of this particular construction holds significance in the fields of language instruction and dictionary creation. However, previous research has not specifically addressed the construction known as “X shang jia X.” This article aims to comprehensively discuss the construction in four main areas: theoretical framework and methodology, grammatical features, development, and constructionalization, which encompasses motivation and mechanism.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical foundation of this article primarily draws upon Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995, 2003, 2006), as well as the theories of Constructionalization and Constructional Changes (Traugott, 1995, 2004, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Traugott & Trousdale, 2013).

Theoretical Basis

Construction Grammar originated from the contributions of prominent linguists including Charles J. Fillmore, Paul Kay, and Adele Goldberg. It emerged as a distinct linguistic framework during the latter part of the 20th century.

Goldberg (1995) defined construction first as follows: “C is a CONSTRUCTION if def C is a form-meaning pair <Fi, Si>, such that some aspects of Fi or some aspects of Si are not strictly predictable from C’s components parts or from other previously established constructions.” Furthermore, in accordance with the foundational tenets of Construction Grammar (Fillmore et al., 1988; Goldberg, 2003; Lakoff, 1987), a set of principles can be delineated to encapsulate the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar. These principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Emphasize the significance of idiosyncrasy and periphery.

2. The study of syntax adopts the “what you see is what you get” approach.

3. The construction exhibits idiomaticity.

4. The distinction between grammar and vocabulary is not clear-cut, and the investigation of syntax cannot be divorced from semantics and pragmatics.

5. The construction is hierarchical, with each level forming a complete and highly integrated system.

The influence of Construction Grammar is steadily increasing worldwide. In China, the study of Construction Grammar has made some progress in terms of theoretical connotation, research scope, and methods. Particularly in recent years, it has gained considerable momentum, although it is still in its early stages and requires further practical research. Overall, Construction Grammar represents a promising area of linguistic research, and analyzing “X shang jia X” in Chinese through this theory can provide valuable insights.

Constructionalization, a concept introduced by Trougott and Trousdale (2013), is a recent addition to the field of linguistics, specifically within the framework of Construction Grammar and historical linguistics. It refers to the process in which a linguistic construction, initially limited to specific words or elements, expands to become more general and productive in a language. This concept provides a diachronic perspective on the emergence and evolution of constructions over time.

The term “Construction Changes” refers to modifications that affect a specific dimension within a construction, such as semantics, morphological phonology, and collocation restrictions. However, it does not involve the creation of new nodes in the construction network, but rather a mismatch between form and semantics. In other words, Construction Changes do not always result in new constructions but rather represent temporary and unregulated usage. Constructionalization, on the other hand, occurs when both syntactic morphology and semantic content undergo demonstrable changes.

Ongoing research on Constructionalization contributes to our understanding of how languages evolve and adapt to meet communicative needs over time. To stay up to date with the latest research and developments in this area, it is recommended to consult recent academic literature and linguistic sources.

The concept of Constructionalization has enriched the study of construction at the micro level, while Construction Changes have provided insights into the systematic nature and

hierarchy of constructions. Since its introduction to China, Constructionalization has revitalized the diachronic study of modern Chinese. Both Constructionalization and Construction Changes are applicable for interpreting the diachronic situation of constructions in Chinese.

In this article, we will primarily utilize the theory of Constructionalization to analyze the Chinese construction “X shang jia X.” We will examine its development process, mechanisms, and motivations.

Research Method

The data utilized in this study is sourced from the BCC corpus of Beijing Language and Culture University and the CCL corpus of Peking University.

CCL Modern Chinese Corpus contains more than 600 million characters, covering literature, drama, newspaper and periodical, internet corpus, practical writing, TV and film, academic literature, spoken language and other types. The CCL Ancient Chinese Corpus covers documents dating from the 11th century BC to the present, and contains corpus from Zhou Dynasty to Republic of China and miscellaneous corpus such as *the Tripitaka Sutra*, *the Twenty-Five Histories*, *the Thirteen Classics Annotations* and *Poems of the Tang Dynasty*. The BBC corpus contains more than 9.5 billion Chinese words, covering many fields such as newspaper, literature, internet, science and technology, and ancient Chinese. Among them, the ancient Chinese corpus is about 2 billion words, covering the literature corpus from ancient Chinese to modern Chinese. The corpus of ancient Chinese is also from Academia Sinica Tagged Corpus of Old/Middle/Early Mandarin Chinese.

Within these corpora, a total of 1,367 instances of modern Chinese corpora containing the word “X shang jia X” were retrieved, resulting in the identification of 206 examples of “X.” Through exhaustive search and exclusion, we collected about 500 corpora from pre-Qin to Republic of China as materials for diachronic research.

The research methodology employed in this article primarily involves statistical analysis and inductive reasoning. By conducting a comprehensive examination and analysis of a substantial number of synchronic and diachronic corpora, this

study presents a comprehensive overview of this construction, elucidates its process of constructionalization, and endeavors to deduce the underlying motivation and mechanism driving its constructionalization.

Grammatical Characteristics of “X Shang Jia X”

In this section, an analysis will be conducted on the grammatical features of “X shang jia X,” focusing on three aspects: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. To effectively integrate both synchronic and diachronic studies, it is necessary to first examine the characteristics of “X shang jia X” in contemporary Chinese, followed by an exploration of its development process and constructionalization.

Syntax of “X Shang Jia X”

Based on statistical data, “X shang jia X” can function as a subject, object, predicate, attribute, adverbial, complement, and independent language within sentences. The precise statistical findings are outlined as follows:

Hence, it is evident that the most common occurrence of “X shang jia X” is as a predicate or an object, followed by the use as a complement or an attribute, while its occurrence as a subject is exceedingly rare. This scarcity can be attributed to the inherent nature of the construction. “X shang jia X” is composed of the subject “X shang” and the predicate “jia X,” with the entire construction functioning as a predicate. It conveys declarative, descriptive, or judgmental meaning and often serves as the focal point of sentence structure and semantics. Consequently, it is frequently employed as the predicate or object of the judgment verb “Shi” (是).

Illustrative instances of “X shang jia X” as a predicate and an object are provided below:

Example 2

这是俗套，要说请，那就俗上加俗。

(张恨水《金粉世家》)

Zhe shi su tao, yao shuo qing, na jiu su shang jia su.

This is tacky, want say please, that just add tacky to

Table 1

The Syntactic Distribution of “X Shang Jia X” in Chinese

	Subject	Object	Predicate	Attribute	Adverbial	Complement	Independent Sentence
Example Numbers	2	227	983	59	4	89	3
Ratio	0.15%	16.6%	71.91%	4.32%	0.29%	6.51%	0.22%

tacky.
This is tacky, and if you say please, then it is extremely tacky.

(Henshui Zhang, *The Story of a Noble Family*)

Example 3

或许，我们这是罪上加罪。

(古华《芙蓉镇》)

Huo xu, wo men zhe shi zui shang jia zui.

Maybe, we this is add crime to crime.

Maybe, we are doubly guilty.

(Hua Gu, *Hibiscus Town*)

Semantics of “X Shang Jia X”

A construction refers to the combination of form and meaning, where the construction itself carries its own meaning in addition to its formal features. According to Goldberg’s Construction Grammar (1995), the meaning of a construction is not simply the sum of the meanings of its individual components. Instead, each construction possesses a constructional meaning that serves as its foundation and is not easily predictable.

The construction “X shang jia X” exhibits the characteristics of word reduplication. Li (1996) has identified the primary semantic function of word reduplication in Chinese as “quantity adjustment.” The constructional meaning of “X shang jia X” can be summarized as denoting “a large number,” “high degree,” or “repeated actions.” The following section will provide a detailed description of these meanings.

The constructional meaning of “X shang jia X” varies depending on the part of speech of “X.” When “X” is a noun, the constructional meaning indicates “a large number,” implying that there is a significant quantity of “X.” When “X” is an adjective, the constructional meaning conveys “high degree,” indicating a substantial extent of “X.” Finally, when “X” is a verb, the constructional meaning signifies “repeated actions,” suggesting either a large number of actions or a prolonged duration of action.

For example:

Example 4

否认法律保证作用，更是错上加错。

(《报刊精选》)

Fou ren fa lu bao zheng zuo yong, geng shi cuo shang jia cuo.

Deny legislation guarantee role, even more is add mistake to mistake.

To deny the role of legal guarantee is even more wrong.
(*Newspaper Selection*)

Example 5

进行导弹试验则是险上加险。

(《报刊精选》)

Jin xing dao dan shi yan ze shi xian shang jia xian.

Proceed missile test then is add risk to risk.

Conducting a missile test is very dangerous.

(*Newspaper Selection*)

Example 6

我们穿的衣服，补上加补。

(《人民日报》)

Wo men chuan de yi fu, bu shang jia bu.

We wear AM clothing, add mend to mend.

The clothes we wear have been mended many times.

(*People’s Daily*)

“Cuo” (错) is a noun in Chinese, denoting a mistake or an error. “Cuo shang jia cuo,” on the other hand, signifies the act of making a mistake on top of another mistake, thereby emphasizing the prevalence of errors. “Xian” (险), an adjective in Chinese, conveys the notion of danger. “Xian shang jia xian,” in turn, conveys a heightened level of danger, surpassing what is considered normal, thereby accentuating the extent of the peril. “Bu” (补), functioning as a verb in Chinese, means to mend. “Bu shang jia bu,” however, signifies the act of repeatedly mending, drawing attention to the repetitive nature of this action.

In summary, the constructional meaning of “X shang jia X” can be simplified to the formula: $r_1[N/A/V + shang + jia + N/A/V \text{ (variables are the same)}]/M[\text{express a large number/high degree/repeated actions (depending on the syntactic meaning of variables)}]$.

Pragmatics of “X Shang Jia X”

From a pragmatic perspective, the word “X shang jia X” possesses a vivid emotional connotation, displaying a discernible inclination towards negative implications. Furthermore, it serves a pragmatic purpose in terms of evaluation, emphasis, irony, or humor.

Pragmatic Color

The usage of “X shang jia X” in both spoken and written language is evenly distributed across various use cases, with no significant stylistic variation. This discussion primarily

focuses on the emotional connotations associated with “X shang jia X.”

Emotional connotations can be categorized as positive and negative colors. The emotional color of a construction is determined by the context in which it appears, which can be classified as positive, negative, or neutral. If a construction consistently appears in a positive context, it acquires a strong positive connotation. Conversely, if it frequently appears in a negative context, it develops a strong negative connotation. In the corpus, it is observed that approximately 30% of the instances of “X shang jia X” occur in positive contexts, while around 65% occur in negative contexts. For example:

Example 7: In the Positive Context

他就是希望，喜上加喜，喜气盈门。

(霍达《穆斯林的葬礼》)

Ta jiu shi xi wang, xi shang jia xi, xi qi ying men.

He just is hope, add happiness to happiness, the door was full of joy.

He just wants to see that two happy events coming one after the other, and the house is full of joy.

(Da Huo, *The Funeral of a Muslim*)

Example 8: In the Negative Context

打得我遍体血肉横飞，死上加死。

(威廉·莎士比亚《哈姆雷特》)

Da de wo bian ti xue rou heng fei, si shang jia si.

Beat AW me all over the body flesh and blood flying in all directions, add death to death.

(They) beat me so hard that my flesh and blood were flying in all directions, and I was completely dead.

(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

Hence, it can be inferred that the emotions exhibited by “X shang jia X” are characterized by their vibrancy and a propensity towards derogatory expressions.

Pragmatic Function

The pragmatic function pertains to the speech effect produced by a speaker when utilizing language forms that are appropriate for the communicative environment within a specific context. This function can be categorized into three main types: evaluation function, emphasis function, and satire or humor function. The evaluation function involves the speaker’s subjective assessment of things after making judgments and analyses. The emphasis function pertains to the construction of a sentence that the speaker considers to be the focal point of the information being conveyed, as well

as the primary focus of the new information received by the listener. Lastly, the satire or humor function refers to the ironic or humorous effect achieved through certain constructions in particular contexts, allowing for the expression of satire or the attainment of humor.

For example:

Example 9

怕死而死岂不是疯上加疯?

(米歇尔·蒙田《蒙田随笔》)

Pa si er si qi bu shi feng shang jia feng?

Fear die while die isn’t it add madness to madness?

Is not crazy and absurd to die for fear of death?

(Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*)

Example 10

好比黄连树上挂猪胆，苦上加苦莫奈何。

(孙宜君《中国歌谣选(第一集)》)

Hao bi huang lian shu shang gua zhu dan, ku shang jia ku mo nai he.

Just like berberine tree top hang pig gall, add pain to pain have no alternative.

It is like hanging a pig gall on a berberine tree, helplessly feeling one pain after another.

(Yijun Sun, *Collection of Chinese Ballads (Part 1)*)

Example 11

贵公司可真是牛上加牛，气死我了。

(新浪微博)

Gui gong si ke zhen shi niu shang jia niu, qi si wo le.

Your esteemed company may really add Ox to Ox, anger die me AW.

Your esteemed company was really “amazing,” it pissed me off.

(Microblog)

For instance, the use of the word “feng shang jia feng” in evaluating “pa si er si” reflects the author’s subjective assessment of the matter’s unreasonableness. The author emphasizes the high level of distress through the inclusion of “ku shang jia ku” and the preceding reference in example 10. Additionally, the word “niu shang jia niu” in example 11 is employed to satirize the company’s behavior and attitude, while also creating a humorous effect.

In conclusion, this section highlights the diverse syntactic functions, semantic meanings, and pragmatic features of the construction “X shang jia X.” It not only serves as various

syntactic elements within a sentence, but also encompasses a range of constructional meanings and pragmatic functions in contemporary Chinese. A comprehensive understanding of the synchronic characteristics of this construction will facilitate a thorough exploration of its historical formation and development, as well as the identification of underlying motivations and mechanisms.

Development of “X Shang Jia X”

According to Traugott and Trousdale (2013), the concept of Constructionalization involves the emergence of a new form with a new meaning. Some Chinese scholars also interpret Constructionalization as a process in which a previously flexible structure transforms into a fixed construction. By examining ancient Chinese texts, it has been observed that the formation and evolution of the construction “X shang jia X” exhibit notable characteristics. It is suggested that the constructionalization of “X shang jia X” has undergone various stages, including “N₁ shang jia N₂,” “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂,” “N shang jia N,” “A shang jia A and V shang jia V.”

Stage I: N Shang V

The instances of “N shang V” can be traced back to ancient Chinese language, where it denotes the act of performing an action on top of another object or entity, for example:

Example 12

时人咸推能掌上舞。

(李大师, 李延寿《南史·羊侃传》)

Shi ren xian tui neng zhang shang wu.

People at that time all praise can dance on the palm.

It was said at the time that (she) could dance on the palm.

(Dashi Li and Yanshou Li, *Biography of Yang Kan of History of the Southern Dynasties*)

Example 13

鹤翻锦翅云中落, 犬带金铃草上飞。

(韦庄《观猎》)

Gu fan jin chi yun zhong luo, quan dai jin ling cao shang fei.

Falcon flap golden wing cloud middle fall, dog with golden bell fly over the grass.

The falcon flapped its golden wings and fell into the

clouds, the dog with the golden bell flew over the grass.

(Zhuang Wei, *Watch the Hunt*)

In the majority of cases, the addition of an object to “N shang V” results in the formation of the transitive “N shang V (O).”

Example 14

又要涪翁作颂, 且图锦上添花。

(黄庭坚《了庵颂》)

You yao fu weng zuo song, qie tu jin shang tian hua.

Again want fu weng compose ode, and want add brilliance to brilliance.

(Sb) want(s) fu weng to compose ode, and that want(s) him to icing on the cake.

(Tingjian Huang, *Ode of Hut Liaoliao*)

Example 15

则教你楚江山觑不得火上弄冰棱, 汉乾坤也做不得碗内拿蒸饼。

(尚仲贤《气英布》)

Ze jiao ni chu jiang shan qu bu de huo shang nong bing leng, han qian kun ye zuo bu de wan nei na zheng bing.

Then tell you Chu rivers and mountains squint can't fire top fiddle icicles, Han universe also do can't bowl interior take steamed cake.

Then you Chu state can not see playing with ice on fire, and Han state also can not take the steamed cake out of the bowl.

(Zhongxian Shang, *Make Ying Bu Angry*)

In general, these structures exhibit two semantic types. The first type involves the noun “N” functioning as the subject and agent. The second type involves the noun “N shang” serving as the subject, but indicating a place or an object among other possibilities.

Stage II: N₁ Shang Jia N₂

The emergence of the word “N₁ shang jia N₂” was observed during the Southern Song Dynasty:

Example 16

饶你道有什么事, 犹是头上着头, 雪上加霜。

(释道原《景德传灯录》)

Rao ni dao you shen me shi, you shi tou shang zhao tou, xue shang jia shuang.

Despite you say have what thing, like is head to head,

add frost to snow.

Anything you say makes it just like adding insult to injury.

(Daoyuan Shi, *The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*)

“Xue shang jia shuang” is the earliest recorded instance of the “N₁ shang jia N₂” construction, which is found nine times in the *Foyulu* (佛语录) of the Southern Song Dynasty. Subsequently, based on this construction, the phrases “huo shang jia you” (add oil to the flames) and “bai shang jia jin” (add one catty to one hundred catty) were also coined. Although there are relatively few instances of “N₁ shang jia N₂,” it predates the “N shang jia N” and “X shang jia X” constructions, making it their precursor.

Stage III: N₁ Shang Jia N₁, N₂ Shang Jia N₂

During the Yuan Dynasty, a notable development emerged in the form of “N shang jia N,” with “guan shang jia guan” being the most prevalent manifestation. This practice entailed the addition of an official position to an existing rank, thereby acquiring a higher rank. Illustrative examples of this phenomenon are as follows:

Example 17

长者若拿兴福去，官上加官职不轻。

(施惠《幽闺记》)

Zhang zhe ruo na xing fu qu, guan shang jia guan zhi bu qing.

Elder if take happiness go, add official to official position not light.

If the elderly bring happiness, there is official and official, and the position is not low.

(Hui Shi, *The Pavilion of Moon-Worship*)

Example 18

相门出相前人奖，官上加官后代昌。

(刘时中《端正好·上高监司》)

Xiang men chu xiang qian ren jiang, guan shang jia guan hou dai chang.

The house come minister predecessor award, add official to descendant flourishing of out official minister.

The house of minister comes out a minister, it is the reward of the predecessors. Obtaining a rank on top of a rank, they are prosperous descendants.

(Shizhong Liu, *Duanzhenghao: To Inspector Gao*)

However, the aforementioned instances of “N shang jia N” are merely a limited selection. Throughout this timeframe, they are frequently conveyed in a continuous format. Typically, there is a four-word phrase preceding and following the “N shang jia N” construction, which we categorize as “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂.” To illustrate, consider the following examples:

Example 19

如今奉命，将你官上加官，禄上加禄也。

(郑光祖《立成汤伊尹耕莘》)

Ru jin feng ming, jiang ni guan shang jia guan, lu shang jia lu ye.

Now receive orders, make you add official to official, add salary to salary too.

I have been ordered to raise you to a higher rank and to a higher salary now.

(Guangzu Zheng, *Chengtang was Established and Yiyin Ploughed in the Fields*)

Example 20

至如你官上加官，也不合亲上做亲。

(王实甫《西厢记》)

Zhi ru ni guan shang jia guan, ye bu he qin shang zuo qin.

To like you add official to official, also not accord with add kinship to kinship.

Even if you increase the rank of official, it is not right to cement old ties by marriage.

(Shifu Wang, *Romance of the Western Chamber*)

In example 20, the format corresponding to “guan shang jia guan” is “qin shang zuo qin.” “Qin shang zuo qin,” although not a member of “N shang jia N,” can be contrasted with it due to the rhythm of its four-letter pattern. The structure of these two formats echoes each other, resulting in a coherent, coordinated, and neat expression that effectively conveys the speaker’s emotions in the drama.

From a technical standpoint, we have only identified one example of “N shang jia N” (guan shang jia guan) in the corpus of Yuan Dynasty. Furthermore, this format is rarely used in isolation, but rather in combination with other four-character cases. Therefore, in this article, we refer to the evolutionary stage of this construction during this period as “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂.” The Yuan Dynasty can be seen as the embryonic stage of the “X shang jia X” construction and also as the initial phase of its development.

Stage IV: A Shang Jia A and V Shang Jia V

In the Yuan Dynasty, the emergence of “N shang jia N” exemplified the presence of “X shang jia X” in historical discourse. During this period, “N shang jia N” was predominantly employed in a combined manner. However, in the subsequent Ming Dynasty, “N shang jia N” underwent a transformation, whereby it became a standalone word, in addition to its continued usage in conjunction with “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂.” This development is evident in various instances, such as:

Example 21

你罪上加罪，岂不知之？

(吴承恩《西游记》)

Ni zui shang jia zui, qi bu zhi zhi?

You add crime to crime, how not know it?

You are committing crime upon crime, don't you know?

(Chengen Wu, *Journey to the West*)

In addition to its independent usage, “N shang jia N,” during the Ming Dynasty, was further developed and expanded in the form of “A shang jia A and V shang jia V.” This expansion not only altered the nature of the construction but also significantly broadened its scope. For instance:

Example 22

你我悄悄往来，亲上加亲，有何不可？

(凌濛初《二刻拍案惊奇》)

Ni wo qiao qiao wang lai, qin shang jia qin, you he bu ke?

You I quietly contact, add kinship to kinship, have what not can?

You and I contact quietly, it becomes closer and closer, why not?

(Mengchu Ling, *Surprise at the Second Moment*)

Example 23

郑夫人抬头看见，惊上加惊。

(冯梦龙《警世通言》)

Zheng fu ren tai tou kan jian, jing shang jia jing.

Zheng madam raise head see, add astonishment to astonishment.

Mrs. Zheng looked up and saw it, feeling extremely astonished.

(Menglong Feng, *Ordinary Words to Warn the World*)

During the Qing Dynasty, a period characterized by the

flourishing of vernacular novels, the concept of “X shang jia X” became increasingly diverse. This was evident through the emergence of concrete examples such as “bing shang jia bing” (病上加病) and “mang shang jia mang” (忙上加忙). The Ming and Qing Dynasties can be regarded as pivotal periods in the development of “X shang jia X,” representing a stage of growth preceding its eventual maturity and stability.

Stage V: The Perfection and Diversification of “X Shang Jia X”

In the formation of the construction, when the variable elements are expanded to include nouns, adjectives, and verbs, the construction is essentially established. During the Republic of China era, the rate of growth in construction variables experienced a slowdown, yet the number of examples increased dramatically. For instance:

Example 24

嗣源既得丽妹，又得黄金，自然喜上加喜，宠上加宠。
(蔡东藩《五代史演义》)

Si yuan ji de li shu, you de huang jin, zi ran xi shang jia xi, chong shang jia chong.

Siyuan not only get Lishu, but also get gold, naturally add happiness to happiness, add favour to favour.

Siyuan not only got Lishu, but also got gold, so he was naturally very happy, very fond of her.

(Dongfan Cai, *Romance of the Five Dynasties*)

During the Republic of China period, the subconstructions of “N shang jia N,” “A shang jia A and V shang jia V” exhibited similar syntactic function, stylistic color, emotional color, and rhetorical function. The only differences were found in the variable parts of speech and the meaning of the construction. Notably, “X shang jia X” demonstrated a clear realization of this construction.

In contemporary Chinese, this construction has shown a growing trend of diversification. Out of the 206 constructional examples available in the corpus, 175 examples are newly added to modern Chinese. It is worth noting that there are more words that can potentially be incorporated into this construction than those included in the corpus. Furthermore, with the advent of the network information age, an increasing number of new usages have emerged, such as “dao shang jia dao” (刀上加刀) and “nai shang jia nai” (奶上加奶).

The expansion of variable examples in the constructionalization process of “X shang jia X” can be summarized in the following diagram:

Table 2

The Expansion of Variable Examples in Constructionalization Process of “X Shang Jia X”

	Noun	Adjective	Verb
Yuan Dynasty	官		
Ming Dynasty	恩、福、利、罪、喜	苦、亲、痛、冤	惊、扰
Qing Dynasty	病、仇、毒、冠、祸、计、气	惨、累、难	恨、困、忙
Republic of China	功、火		宠、愁、醉
Modern China	疤、蛋、分、钢、光、鬼、会、劲、囤、糠、礼、力、例、令、律、霉、梦、谜、命、模范、年、尼、钱、墙、情、伤、事(儿)、税、桃、头、网、污秽、屋、心、信念、雪、灾、债、砖	白、保险、笨、残、差、迟、丑、臭、蠢、错、大、淡、多、恶、肥、富、干、翻、烦、封、疯、负、古怪、光荣、贵、好、黑、过、化、悔、嫉妒、红、红火、坏、假、贱、紧、挤、忌、哭、亏、烂、红、红、火、坏、假、贱、紧、挤、忌、哭、亏、烂、紧张、精、窘、空、快、狂、乐、恼、闹、闹、扭、阔、辣、懒、老、冷、凉、怕、屈、缺、胜、死、亮、慢、美、密、难过、浓、碎、锁、贪、疼、贴、疲、平、浅、巧、青、穷、头痛、误、笑、啸、曲、热、柔、弱、傻、少、心疼、羞、怨、晕、旺、稳、无聊、稀、细、鲜、险、新、严、艳、阴、硬、脏、糟、胀、紫	爆、变、补、掺、吵、撑、挫、冻、堵、罚、翻、烦、封、疯、负、过、化、悔、嫉妒、挤、忌、哭、亏、烂、乐、恼、闹、闹、扭、狂、乐、恼、闹、闹、扭、怕、屈、缺、胜、死、碎、锁、贪、疼、贴、穷、头痛、误、笑、啸、心疼、羞、怨、晕、折、肿、转

Hence, a concise paragraph can be employed to encapsulate the process of constructionalization: N shang V (O) (ancient China) → N₁ shang jia N₂ (Southern Song Dynasty) → N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂ (Yuan Dynasty) → N shang jia N (Ming Dynasty) → A shang jia A and V shang jia V (Ming Dynasty) → X shang jia X (Qing Dynasty and Republic of China).

Constructionalization of “X Shang Jia X”

There are various factors and processes involved in the constructionalization of “X shang jia X.” Constructionalization occurs when a discrete linguistic unit transforms into a stable linguistic unit, and this transformation is driven by a specific determinant. The motivation for constructionalization typically arises from external influences on the language system, determining why a linguistic unit undergoes such a transformation. On the other hand, the mechanism of constructionalization involves the formation and evolution of a construction through the structural relationship and operational mode of its constituent elements. In the case of lexicalization, the mechanism originates from the language system itself. The motivation for “X shang jia X” can be succinctly described as the desire to achieve cadence and rhythm, to convey contextual meaning, and to fulfill expressive needs. Furthermore, the mechanism of “X shang jia X” can be summarized as the replication of variables and the process of analogization.

Motivations: Cadence and Rhythm, Context and Need

In the Chinese language, the use of tones serves to clearly demarcate syllables and contributes to the language’s rich musicality characterized by variations in pitch and intonation. The role of cadence and rhythm in shaping language expression is of great significance. The prevalence and greater acceptance of the word “X shang jia X” can be compared to “X zhong X” (X 中 X) and “X shang X” can be attributed to its alignment with the standard rhythm pattern known as “2 + 2” (consisting of four characters and two beats) in Chinese.

Numerous instances can be found where this four-character rhythm pattern is employed, exemplifying its widespread usage:

Example 25

当日官上加官，今日箭上加箭；色中选色，今日弓上加弓。

(梦笔生《金屋梦》)

Dang ri guan shang jia guan, jin ri jian shang jia jian; se zhong xuan se, jin ri gong shang jia gong.

That day add official to official, today add arrow to arrow; that day select color from color, today add bow to bow.

(The man) increased the rank of official on that day, and (he) got arrow after arrow today; (the man) selected a color of the colors on that day, and (he) got bow after bow today.

(Bisheng Meng, *A Well-to-Do Family*)

The aforementioned “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂” is also motivated by this principle. These four-character words exhibit a harmonious beauty in their rhythm as they correspond to one another.

In ancient Chinese, the variables of “X shang jia X” consist of monosyllabic words. The combination of two variables and two constants into a four-syllable linguistic unit aligns with the Chinese expression pattern. Over time, these four-word structures have become easily established and accepted. The first and last words of “X shang jia X” are identical, making them catchy to read and easy to remember, learn, and disseminate. The combination form of “X shang jia X” also demonstrates the orderly and symmetrical balance of sentences, resulting in cohesive text, smooth language flow, and harmonious, stable, and imposing sentences. Therefore, the construction of “X shang jia X” is significantly influenced by cadence and rhythm.

The role of context is widely recognized as a significant

factor in the process of constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013). Specifically, the “context of repeated use” is crucial in facilitating the development and refinement of the construction “X shang jia X.” For example:

Example 26

官上加官，爵上加爵。

(罗懋登《三宝太监西洋记》)

Guan shang jia guan, jue shang jia jue.

Add official to official, add nobility to nobility.

An official title is obtained on the basis of an official title, and a knighthood is obtained on the basis of a knighthood.

(Maodeng Luo, *Voyage to the West*)

Example 27

官上加官，职上加职。

(佚名《走马春秋》)

Guan shang jia guan, zhi shang jia zhi.

Add official to official, add position to position.

An official title is obtained on the basis of an official title, and a position is obtained on the basis of a position.

(Anonymous, *Yue Yi Attacked the State of Qi*)

During the formation stage of construction, it is more common to encounter cases where “X shang jia X” is associated with semantic meaning, such as “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂” mentioned earlier. This results in a clear and independent form for “X shang jia X” with a solidified meaning. As a result, the construction “N shang jia N” is simplified from the previous form of “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂.”

Furthermore, the combined form also exhibits rhetorical characteristics, serving functions such as “strengthening mood,” “contrasting,” and “making sentences neat and symmetrical.” This transformation from a rhetorical phenomenon to a grammatical phenomenon is referred to as “rhetorical transclassification.” It is closely connected to the context and exhibits certain analogies.

Another motivation for the constructionalization of “X shang jia X” is the need to express, which is closely related to semantic weakening. The excessive use of predicates leads to a loss of semantic strength, while the excessive use of nouns results in a lack of freshness. The concept of degree plays a crucial role in human understanding of the external world and reflects subjective cognition. Lv (1944) observed that degree adverbs in Chinese, which express height, gradually lose their impact over time. Semantic weakening is a natural

phenomenon in language development, where the meaning of a word gradually diminishes with excessive use, causing the conveyed feelings, attitudes, and values to become diluted.

To illustrate, let’s consider the adjective “nan” (difficult). When people want to emphasize the level of difficulty, they use words like “you dian nan” (a little difficult), “fei chang nan” (very difficult), “te bie nan” (extremely difficult), “tai nan le” (too difficult), and so on. However, with prolonged use, these forms of degree adverbs gradually experience semantic weakening and fail to meet the expressive needs of individuals. To emphasize their subjective feelings, language users need to find more suitable expressions than the original forms. This leads to the emergence of expressions such as “nan shang jia nan” (add difficulty to difficulty), “nan ru deng tian” (as difficult as climbing up to the sky), “ji hu bu neng zuo dao” (can barely do), and others. Therefore, “A shang jia A” is a new and highly emphasized form that arises as a result of the semantic weakening of “A” and “degree adverb + A.” This not only represents the weakening of the original form but also addresses the need for enhanced expression.

Similarly, nouns are often less effective than “N shang jia N” in expressing subjective degrees. For instance, when evaluating an incident involving a vicious gangster stealing jewels or kidnapping hostages, expressions like “zui jia yi deng” (doubly guilty) and “zui wu ke she” (only god forgives) are clearly less vivid, graphic, and innovative compared to “zui shang jia zui” (add crime to crime) in Chinese. Therefore, the change in expressive needs also serves as a significant motivation for promoting the constructionalization of “X shang jia X.”

Mechanisms: Replication of Variables and Analogization

The concept of variable replication pertains to the process in which two distinct variables evolve into the same two variables, “N shang jia N.” In “N₁ shang jia N₂,” there exists a semantic correlation between N₁ and N₂. For instance, in the phrase “huo shang jia you” (add oil to the flames), oil serves as a substance that supports combustion. Similarly, in “xue shang jia shuang” (add frost to snow), both frost and snow convey a sense of coldness or desolation. The two N’s in “N shang jia N” exhibit semantic consistency. The former represents the original state, while the latter denotes an addition, thereby indicating a heightened degree.

Initially, the relationship between variables was based on semantic association, but it later evolved into semantic identity. This shift primarily serves to emphasize an increase in quantity, encompassing factors such as amount, degree, and

fluency. Although snow and frost possess similar meanings, they represent the state of things differently, and this disparity does not effectively convey the accumulation of quantities. By using “xue shang jia xue” (add snow to snow) instead of “xue shang jia shuang,” the quantity of snow and other related meanings can be clearly discerned.

Similar to the replication of the first variable, the second variable is combined with other components in the same structure. Hence, we refer to the assimilation of variables as variable replication, which constitutes a crucial mechanism in the construction of “X shang jia X.”

The process known as analogization involves using certain words and forms in a language as a reference point, and then adjusting other words and forms to align with them, resulting in the creation of new words or forms. Analogization plays a crucial role in the construction of language, as it allows individuals to deduce additional variables based on the semantic connections of existing variables. These newly deduced variables can seamlessly integrate into linguistic constructions and align with people’s expression and comprehension.

The following example serves to illustrate this concept:

Example 28

但比起那些有家口的同事，就算是好上加好的了。
(王安忆《长恨歌》)

Dan bi qi na xie you jia kou de tong shi, jiu suan shi hao shang jia hao de le.

But contrast up that have family AM colleague, just consider is add beauty AW AW.

But it’s even better than my colleagues who have families.

(Anyi Wang, *A Song of Everlasting Sorrow*)

The word “hao shang jia hao” conveys a sense of satisfaction and represents a profound interpretation of the core concept of “hao” (good). In accordance with this interpretation, the word can be used to juxtapose the antonyms of “hao,” such as “huai” (bad) and “mei” (beautiful), with the suffix “X shang jia X.” For instance:

Example 29

使学生和教师的伙食坏上加坏。
(张洁《无字》)

Shi xue sheng he jiao shi de huo shi shang jia huai.

Make student and teacher AM meals add bad to bad.

Make the meals of students and teachers worse.

(Jie Zhang, *No Letters*)

Example 30

使该剧美上加美，各地电视台争相购买。
(《人民日报(海外版)》)

Shi gai ju mei shang jia mei, ge di dian shi tai zheng xiang gou mai.

Make this drama add beauty to beauty, each region TV station compete to purchase.

Make the show more and more beautiful, inviting TV stations all over the country to buy.

(*People’s Daily (Overseas Edition)*)

In order to further elucidate the extent of human deficiency denoted by the word “bad,” one may employ the word “jian” (贱) to connote a sense of cheapness. Similarly, to depict the antithesis of physical attractiveness, one may introduce the category “chou” (丑) to signify ugliness.

Example 31

两人还真是绝配啊，贱上加贱。
(新浪微博)

Liang ren hai zhen shi jue pei a, jian shang jia jian.

Two people also really is perfect match MP, add contemptibility to contemptibility.

Oh, they’re such a good match, it is really base.

(Microblog)

Example 32

以故形容消瘦，丑上加丑。
(《报刊精选》)

Yi gu xing rong xiao shou, chou shang jia chou.

Therefore, appearance emaciated, add ugliness to ugliness.

Therefore, (Sb) is emaciated and extremely ugly.

(*Newspaper Selection*)

The aforementioned illustration demonstrates that the variable “hao” can be derived from different Angle classes, including positive, negative, similar, related, and other variables that can be incorporated into the construction. This leads to a significant enhancement in the productivity of the construction process. Consequently, the utilization of variable words serves as a crucial mechanism in the constructionalization of “X shang jia X.”

Conclusion

Based on an extensive corpus and the theory of

constructionalization, this article conducts a comprehensive investigation of the common Chinese structure “X shang jia X” and presents the following findings:

From a synchronic perspective, “X shang jia X” exhibits notable characteristics in terms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Within a sentence, “X shang jia X” can function as the subject, predicate, object, attributive, adverbial, and complement, with the most common roles being predicate and object. Depending on the part of speech, “X shang jia X” conveys constructional meanings such as “a large number,” “high degree,” and “repeated actions.” Additionally, “X shang jia X” tends to carry pejorative connotations and serves pragmatic functions such as evaluation, emphasis, irony, or humor.

From a diachronic perspective, the development of “X shang jia X” is traced. The constructionalization of “X shang jia X” originated before the Yuan Dynasty and underwent two stages: “N₁ shang jia N₂” and “N₁ shang jia N₁, N₂ shang jia N₂.” During the Ming Dynasty, “N shang jia N” emerged, and “A shang jia A and V shang jia V” evolved from it. The Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China witnessed the gradual stability and maturity of “X shang jia X.” In modern Chinese, “X shang jia X” demonstrates diversification.

From the perspective of constructionalization, the development of “X shang jia X” is driven by motivating factors and involves the interaction mechanism among various elements. Three main motivations for “X shang jia X” are identified: (1) The Chinese four-syllable/two-beat rhythm contributes to the solidification of “X shang jia X” into common grammatical units, i.e., constructionalization. (2) The increasing need for expression leads to higher frequency of use and acceptability of the construction, resulting in its widespread adoption. (3) Rhetorical phenomena in context are simplified and transformed into grammatical phenomena, thereby promoting the constructionalization of “X shang jia X.” Furthermore, the mechanism of “X shang jia X” can be summarized as the replication of variables and the process of analogization. The former refers to the assimilation of variables in the early stages of the constructionalization process, while the latter pertains to the enhancement of construction productivity.

However, this study has some limitations. For instance, further exploration of the details of the historical evolution study is warranted, and the analysis of the evolution characteristics of “X shang jia X” can be enriched by incorporating other linguistic theories.

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