From a conditional marker to a discourse marker: The uses of *dehua* 的话 in natural Mandarin conversation

Wei Wang [*]

School of Modern Languages, Georgia Institute of Technology, 613 Cherry Street, Atlanta, GA 30332-0375, United States

Abstract

This paper investigates two interrelated uses of the utterance-final form *dehua* in Mandarin Chinese, its the conditional marker use and the discourse marker use. While the conditional function of *dehua* has been widely recognized, its newly emerging discourse functions have not yet received much attention. Thus, this study first provides a detailed characterization of the two uses from the structural and semantic–pragmatic perspectives. It argues that *dehua* differs from regular Mandarin conditional markers because it marks both realis and irrealis protases. This ability is the result of generalized conversational implicatures from conditional contexts. Second, this paper establishes a connection between the two uses of *dehua*, providing a synchronic account for its development from a conditional marker to a discourse marker. It argues that *dehua* is essentially a boundary marker, indicating the boundary of protases as a conditional marker and the boundary of various types of intonation units as a discourse marker. This final position is demonstrated to shape the discourse functions of *dehua* in crucial ways. By studying *dehua* in natural conversations, this paper sheds light on its development pathway from a conditional marker to a discourse marker in general. It also contributes to the understanding of the diversity of discourse markers as well as the ways in which form and functions interact.
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1. Introduction

This paper examines two uses of a multifunctional form in Mandarin Chinese *dehua*, that is, the conditional marker use and the discourse marker use. *Dehua* is typologically interesting because it originally comes from two words of different syntactic levels, a nominalizer and genitive particle *de* and a content word *hua*, meaning 'speech'. When they are lexicalized as a single form, *dehua* means 'the speech of (someone), what someone says'. While the lexical meaning of *dehua* still persists, it has now come to assume multiple grammatical-pragmatic functions. In addition to its lexical use, *dehua* can also be used as: (1) a topic marker; (2) a conditional marker; and (3) a discourse marker. Four examples are presented below to illustrate *dehua*'s lexical use and three extended functions.

Abbreviations: ADV, adverb; CLF, classifier; COP, copular; DM, discourse marker; GEN, genitive; INT, interjection; NEG, negative; NOM, nominalizer; PRT, particle.

* Corresponding author at : 1080 W Peachtree St. Northwest APT 205, Atlanta, GA30309, United States.
  E-mail address: wei.wang@modlangs.gatech.edu.

(1) **lexical use** (zho_1014)

我	信	你	**的**	**话**	吗?
wo	xin	ni	de	hua	ma
I	believe	you	**GEN**	**speech**	PRT

'Do I believe what you said?'

(2) **topic marker** (zho_0766)

妈妈	**的话**	是	暂时	不	来	啊?
mama	dehua	shi	zanshi	bu	lai	a
mom	**DEHUA**	COP	at-the-moment	NEG	coming	PRT

'Speaking of mom, is (she) not coming at the moment?'

(3) **conditional marker** (zho_0682)

他	不	可以	**的话**	人家	不	会	请	他	的,
ta	bu	keyi	dehua	renjia	bu	hui	qing	ta	de
he	NEG	capable	**DEHUA**	people	NEG	will	hire	him	PRT

'If he were not capable, people would not hire him.'

(4) **discourse marker** (zho_0848)

所以	**的话**,	你	呢,	稍微	带	点	小	礼物	给	他们	就	行	了.
suoyi	dehua	ni	ne	shaowei	dai	dian	xiao	liwu	gei	tamen	jiu	xing	le
so	**DEHUA**	you	PRT	just	bring	a-little	small	gift	to	them	ADV	all-right	PRT

'So, you, just bring some small gift to them, (that) would be all right.'

This paper specifically focuses on the conditional marker use and the discourse marker use of *dehua*. These two functions are chosen for three reasons. First, although the conditional use of *dehua* has been widely noted (e.g. Li and Thompson, 1981; Wang, 1995; Yang, 2007), its unique structural and semantic properties, which distinguish it from other Mandarin conditional markers, have not yet received thorough examination. Second, *dehua* is being increasingly used as a discourse marker in spoken language. However, it is not clear what kind of roles *dehua* plays in Mandarin conversation due to the lack of research on its discourse functions. Third, from a typological perspective, its development from a conditional marker to a discourse marker has occurred in many languages. Yet the ways in which conditional markers and discourse markers are related vary greatly across different languages. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate such a case in Mandarin.

Previous studies on *dehua* are largely interested in its diachronic development. Zhang (2002) identifies the topic-marking and conditional-marking functions of *dehua* and argues that the conditional semantics of *dehua* come from its conditional context. When *dehua* is used in a conditional clause signaled by a canonical conditional marker, it absorbs the conditionality, which then allows it to function independently as a conditional marker. Jiang (2004) focuses on the structural evolution of *dehua* from two adjacent non-constituent words, a nominalizer and genitive particle *de* and a noun *hua* 'speech, saying'. Specifically, she argues that *de* and *hua* used to occur in the structure *shuo* 'to say' + VP/NP + *de hua*, in which the verb phrase or noun phrase modified *hua*. Reanalysis occurs when *hua* and the modifying phrase are co-referential, since *hua* becomes semantically redundant and the genitive particle *de* loses its syntactic role, resulting in the chunking of *de* and *hua*. In other words, *de* and *hua* are thus lexicalized as one form. Further, Jiang identifies three functions of the lexicalized *dehua* in modern Chinese vernacular fictions, i.e. marking topics, marking conditionals, and filling pauses. Jiang's study not only sheds light on the lexicalization of *dehua*, but also provides historical evidence for the multifunctionality of *dehua*. However, her analysis of the functions of the lexicalized *dehua*, such as the pause-filling function, is somewhat problematic. As I will show later, *dehua* is more than a pause filler; rather, it fulfills important discourse functions in conversation.

While previous scholarship has demonstrated how *de* and *hua* have developed into a single form with multiple functions historically, it remains unclear how this lexicalized form functions in contemporary Mandarin conversation. Therefore, a fine-grained analysis of contemporary data is called for in order to grasp the functional spectrum of *dehua* and to understand the connections between its different functions. Thus, this paper first examines the conditional use of *dehua*, focusing on its distinct structural and semantic features in Section 3. Then, it discusses the ways in which *dehua* is used as a discourse marker in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 provides accounts for two issues: (1) the distinctiveness of *dehua* as a conditional marker; (2) how the discourse functions of *dehua* are shaped by its conditional use.