

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*

詞類	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*

詞類	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*

詞類	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

Nd	23	16	26	25	52	142	4.34
VH	35	40	36	24	2	137	4.18
。	26	32	36	23	18	135	4.12
VC	38	39	26	15	14	132	4.03
Nf	12	25	18	30	13	98	2.99

Table 2b. Top-10 Categories after *zhengzai*

詞類	右 1	右 2	右 3	右 4	右 5	合計	比例
Na	14	105	132	169	138	558	17.37
VC	290	56	59	31	30	466	14.51
，	0	65	73	66	71	275	8.56
VH	81	13	26	30	31	181	5.64
Nc	37	37	25	29	28	156	4.86
VA	57	24	28	17	14	140	4.36
D	24	11	13	45	45	138	4.30
。	0	19	45	33	27	124	3.86
P	47	9	6	12	18	92	2.86
VE	34	10	9	12	23	88	2.74

(Na = common noun; Nc = place word; Nd = temporal word; Nf = measure; Nep = demonstrative determinative; Nh = pronoun; VA = active intransitive verb; VC = active transitive verb; VE = active verb with a sentential object; VH = stative intransitive verb; D = adverb; P = preposition; SHI = 是)

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 distinct *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* (也許), *haoxiang* (好像), and so on.

- (1) 他 可能 在 躲避 什麼
ta keneng zai duobi sheme
 he possibly ZAI avoiding something
 “He is possibly avoiding something.”
- (2) 她 想 了 一 下, 似乎 在 找 台 詞
ta xiangle yixia sihu zai zhao taici
 she think a while seem ZAI search what to say
 “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

tade shou keneng zhengzai mo heihei de jiyou
his hands may ZHENGZAI group dark and black engine oil
“His hands may be groping in the dark the black engine oil.”

- (4) 技術性 反彈 似乎 正在 醞釀
jishuxing fantan sihu zhengzai yunniang
technical rebound seem ZHENGZAI ferment
“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.

- (5) 真的嗎? 你 又 在 / *正在 騙人
*zhendema ni you zai/*zhengzai qianren*
really you again ZAI/*ZENGZAI deceive people
“Really? You are deceiving people again.”

The above example indicates that the event with *zhengzai* can not be viewed as a repetition or a recurrence pertaining to a previous reference event. Thus, *zhengzai* is [-iterative], constrained by semantic and contextual factors, but *zai* is free to be used with [+iterative] events.

According to Givon [16], time adverbs can be classified into three sub-groups: temporal adverbs, frequency adverbs, and aspectuality adverbs. Both *zai* and *zhengzai* can co-occur with temporal adverbs, such as *xianzai* (現在), *muqian* (目前), *zuijin* (最近) and the like.

- (6) 你們知道 那個 男孩 現在 心中 在 想 什麼 嗎?
nimen zhidao nage nanhai xianzai xinzhong zai xiang sheme ma
you know that boy now in mind ZAI think what
“You know now what that boy is thinking in mind.”
- (7) 明知, 她 這時 在 做 什麼
mingzhi ta zheshi zai zuo sheme
know perfectly well she at this time ZAI do what
“Knew perfectly well what she is doing at this time”
- (8) 現在 正在 施工 中
xianzai zhengzai shigong zhong
now ZHENGZAI construction under
“Now it is under construction”
- (9) 因為 那時 孩子 正在 傷心
yinwei nashi haizi zhengzai shangxin
because at that time child ZHENGZAI sad
“Because at that time the child is being sad.”

But, there are some limitations of *zhengzai*. It can only occur with temporal adverbs referring to a specific time point or a short period of time with a clear reference point as *youyitian* (有一天), *xianzai* (現在), *zuijin* (最近) and so on. It cannot occur with a durational time adverb without a specified reference point, such as *meitian* (每天), *shiwunianlai* (十五年來), *yibeizi* (一輩子), etc.

- (10) 大人們 會 比 現在 每天 在 / *正在 用 的人 還要 懂 嗎
*darenmen hui bi xianzai meitian zai/*zhengzai yong deren haiyao dong ma*
adults will than now everyday ZAI/*ZENGZAI use people more understand
“Will the adults understand more than those who use everyday?”
- (11) 他 不是 個 騙子, 就是 個 沒有 感覺 一輩子 都 在 / *正在 說 謊 的 白痴。
*Ta bushi ge pianzi jiushi ge meiyou ganjue yibeizi dou zai/*zhengzai shuohuang de baichi*
he either a liar or a without feeling lifetime all ZAI/*ZENGZAI tell a lie DE idiot
“He is either a liar or an idiot who telling a lie for a lifetime without feeling.”

From this, we know that *zhengzai* indicates what is on-going at a specific time reference, locating the event in the time axis and contributing contrastive and attitudinal features to the sentence [3].

With frequency adverbs such as *changchang* (常常), *zhongshi* (總是) and aspectuality adverbs as *luxu* (陸續), *buduan* (不斷), *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，
*jijinhui 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
 會員大會進行理監事及理事長改選。
*Muqian quanguo ge yundong danxiang xiehui luxu zai/*zhengzai zhaokai*
 currently national each exercise single-item association continuously ZAI/*ZENGZAI hold
huiyuan dahui jinxing lijianshi ji lishizhang gaixuan
 general meeting carry 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 xiasheng*
 painter leisurely and carefree ZAI/*ZENGZAI draw from nature
 “The painter is leisurely and carefree drawing from nature”

(15) a. 整天都在不停的叫

zhengtian dou zai butingde jiao
 all day ZAI continuously cry
 “(she) is crying continuously all day.”

b. 聽見小雞正在唧唧的吵鬧

tingjian xiauji 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.

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Web Resource

Sinica Corpus: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/ftms~bin/kiwi1/mkiwish>