

FUNCTIONAL-SEMANTIC DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTICLE 就 (JIÙ) IN CHINESE

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Abstract: The article analyzes the functional-semantic characteristics of the particle 就 (jiù) in Modern Chinese. Four principal types of its usage—temporal, quantitative (restrictive), conditional, and emphatic meanings—are examined, and a unified semantic basis that connects them, namely the principle of “deviation toward an earlier (higher) point than the expected norm,” is substantiated. The study discusses the nature of 就 as a scalar operator, its systematic opposition to 才, its meaning of subjective large quantity, and the issues related to its correspondence in the Uzbek language.

Keywords: Chinese language, particle 就 (jiù), functional-semantic analysis, scalar operator, deviation from the expected norm.

Introduction

In the function-word (虚词) system of Modern Chinese, the particle 就 (jiù) stands out for its high frequency and its broad range of meanings. 就 is most often studied in comparison with its counterpart 才 (cái), since these two particles in many respects occupy opposite semantic poles. The aim of the present study is to give a functional-semantic description of 就 and to identify the semantic mechanism that unifies its various meanings. The study employs descriptive and comparative-semantic methods.

Turning to the state of scholarship on this problem, Bai Meili interpreted the quantitative meaning of 就 as an increase in value (增值)¹³⁹; the subjective-quantity (主观量) approach was developed in the works of Zhou Shoujin¹⁴⁰. The asymmetry in the semantic change of 就 and 才 was pointed out by Wang Qun¹⁴¹; an analysis that unifies the four meanings on the basis of a single scalar mechanism was proposed by Lai¹⁴². In recent years,

¹³⁹白梅丽. 现代汉语“才”和“就”的语义分析 // 中国语文. — 1987. — 第 5 期. — 第 390–398 页.

¹⁴⁰周守晋. “主观量”的语义信息特征与“就”、“才”的语义 // 北京大学学报 (哲学社会科学版). — 2004. — 第 41 卷, 第 3 期. — 第 121–131 页.

¹⁴¹王群. 试论“才”和“就”语义变化的双向性和不平衡性 // 语言科学. — 2005. — 第 4 卷, 第 6 期. — 第 18–26 页.

¹⁴²Lai H.-L. Rejected expectations: the scalar particles cai and jiu in Mandarin Chinese // Linguistics. — 1999. — Vol. 37, No. 4. — P. 625–661.

the comparative semantics of 就 and 才 has also been studied from the perspective of force dynamics¹⁴³.

In traditional Chinese grammar, 就 belongs to the adverb (副词) class and precedes the predicate. Historically, 就 derives from a verb meaning “to approach, to go to a place,” and grammaticalized from the meaning of spatial proximity to that of temporal proximity (immediacy), and then to a logical-connective function. In “Eight Hundred Words of Modern Chinese,” Lü Shuxiang distinguishes several principal meanings of 就¹⁴⁴. Like 才, 就 is also a focus-sensitive operator, and its scope depends on the logical stress in the sentence.

When expressing time, 就 indicates that an event occurred earlier than expected or that an action is carried out quickly: 他八点就来了 — “He already came at eight o’clock” (earlier than expected). This meaning is opposed to 才: 他八点才来 — “He came only at eight o’clock” (later than expected). The meaning of immediacy is clearly manifested in the ... 就 pattern: 他一下课就走了 — “He left as soon as the class ended.” Unlike 才, temporal 就 freely co-occurs with the sentence-final perfective 了¹⁴⁵; this accords with its “completed/early” semantics.

When 就 occurs with quantity, it manifests itself in two directions. First, it evaluates a quantity as greater than expected — as a subjective large quantity (主观大量): 他一个人就吃了五碗 — “He ate five (whole) bowls all by himself.” Bai Meili explains this as an increase in value (增值) and contrasts 就 as an increasing operator with 才 as a decreasing (减值) operator. Second, 就 is also used in a restrictive meaning, as “only, merely”: 就你一个人 — “only you alone.” Zhou Shoujin explains these phenomena within the framework of subjective-quantity theory; the asymmetry between the quantitative meanings of 就 and 才 has been studied separately.

In conditional constructions, 就 marks a sufficient condition and the immediate result that follows from it; it usually occurs in the 只要 ... 就 or 如果 ... 就 pattern: 只要努力, 就能成功 — “As long as one makes an effort, one will succeed.” Here 就 expresses a relation of sufficiency and thereby stands in opposition to the 只有 ... 才 pattern, which expresses necessity: 才 marks a necessary condition, while 就 marks a sufficient one.

就 expresses the speaker’s firm affirmation, conviction, or the meaning of identity. In the 就是 pattern it emphasizes equality or identity: 这就是我要的 — “This is exactly what I

¹⁴³姜毅宁, 陈振宇. 力动态视角下“就”和“才”的语义对比研究 // 辞书研究. — 2023. — 第3期.

¹⁴⁴吕叔湘. 现代汉语八百词 (增订本). — 北京: 商务印书馆, 1999.

¹⁴⁵史金生. 时间副词“就”“再”“才”的语义、语法分析 // 思维与智慧. — 1993. — 第3期. — 第43–46页.

want.” 就 also conveys the meaning of firmness and obstinacy: 我就不去 — “I just won’t go.” The interaction of 就 with focus and context in these meanings has been examined in detail in the study by Chen Liming¹⁴⁶.

According to Lai’s analysis, 就 is a scalar operator that presupposes a change in the truth value of a proposition and indicates that this change occurs at a point earlier (or lower) than the expected one. Thus, all four meanings of 就 are manifestations, on different scales (time, quantity, condition, evaluation), of a single mechanism — deviation from the expected norm. 就 always marks the side that is “ahead of / above the norm,” and it is precisely this feature that opposes it to 才, which marks what is “behind / below the norm.” This opposition is consistently explained within the framework of focus-background theory¹⁴⁷ and the force-dynamics approach¹⁴⁸.

Summarizing the results of the study, we present in the table below the principal meanings of 就, the scales on which they operate, representative examples, and their Uzbek equivalents.

Table 1. Functional-semantic meanings of the particle 就 (jiù)

Meaning type	Scale	Example	Uzbek equivalent
Temporal	early point	他八点就来了 — “He already came at eight o’clock”	allaqachon; darhol; ...-(i)boq
Quantity / restriction	quantity scale	他一个人就吃了五碗 — “He alone ate five bowls”	...ning ‘ziyoq; hatto; (cheklovda) faqat
Conditional	sufficient condition	只要努力就能成功 — “As long as one makes an effort, one will succeed”	...sa bo‘lgani; ...-(a)versa

¹⁴⁶陈立民. 也说“就”和“才” // 当代语言学. — 2005. — 第 1 期. — 第 16–34 页.

¹⁴⁷Hole D. P. Focus and Background Marking in Mandarin Chinese: System and Theory behind cái, jiù, dōu and yě. — London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

Meaning type	Scale	Example	Uzbek equivalent
Emphatic	affirmation / identity	这就是我要的 — “This is exactly what I want”	aynan; xuddi; -oq

Uzbek is an agglutinative language, so the scalar meaning of 就 is expressed in it not by a single particle but by several means. The meaning of time and immediacy is most often conveyed by “allaqachon,” “darhol,” the suffix “-(i)boq,” or the patterns “-gan zahoti / ...ishi bilanoq” (—...就 → “...-gan zahoti”). Subjective large quantity is expressed by means such as “...ning ‘ziyoq,” “hatto,” while the restrictive meaning is expressed by “faqat,” “-gina.” Conditional 就 corresponds to the pattern “...sa bo‘lgani / ...-(a)versa,” and the identity meaning 就是 corresponds to the words “aynan,” “xuddi.” This asymmetry shows the necessity of preserving the subjective-evaluative and expectation component of 就 in translation.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis show that the temporal, quantitative, conditional, and emphatic meanings of 就 are not mutually independent but are, on different scales, manifestations of a single scalar operator with a common semantic basis — the marking of a point that lies ahead of or above the expected norm. It is precisely this feature that systematically opposes 就 to 才. In Uzbek these meanings are rendered not as a unified whole but by scattered means; this fact confirms that comparing the particles 就 and 才 on the basis of Uzbek-language material and studying their translation pragmatics is a promising direction.

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