

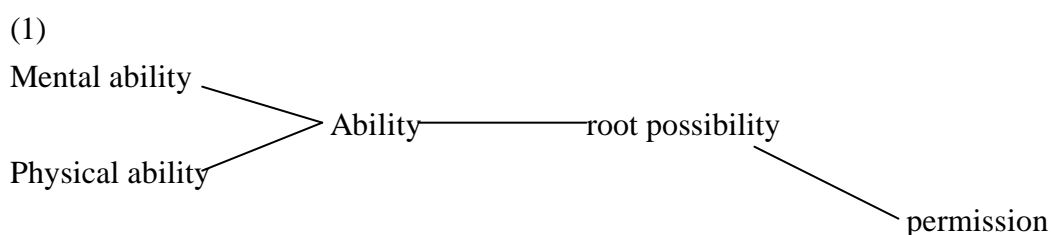
From Ability to Permission: The grammaticalisation pathway of *ho* in Chinese

1 Introduction

This mini project aims to trace the grammatical pathway of *ho* (可) in Chinese. *Ho* originally denoted ability and has grammaticalised into modality of permission via several stages. The discussion is according to the grammaticalisation pathway to permission suggested by (Bybee et al. 1994). Following the Introduction section, the pathway is illustrated with the help of *can* in English in section two. In section three, the tokens of *ho* taken in ancient Chinese are analyzed. In section four, the pathway for *ho* would be charted. Finally, section five is the summarized section while the remaining research questions are noted.

2 *Can* in English

Bybee et al. (1994) has suggested the grammaticalisation pathway to permission from mental ability or physical ability. The pathway is recited in (1):

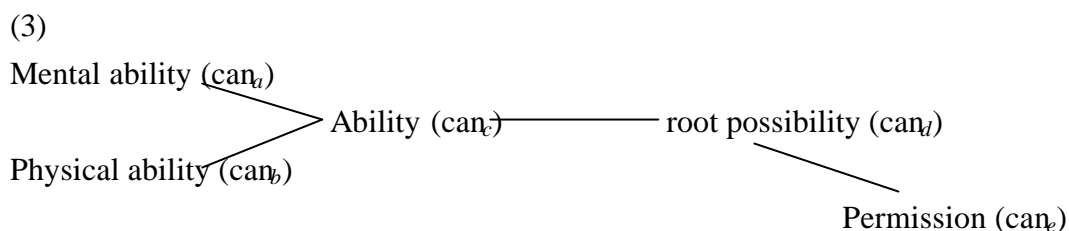


This can be well illustrated by the English *can*. *Can* means ‘be able to; have ability to’ in (2a) and (2b).

- 2 (a) I can_a speak English.
(b) I can_b swim.
(c) I can_c only type very slowly as I am a beginner. (Coates 1983:92)
(d) I can_d ride that horse. (Bybee et al. 1994 : 192)
(e) Can_e we leave now?

Though (2a) shows mental ability and (2b) shows physical ability, both *can* in (2a) and (2b) means ‘to know how’. In (2a), ‘I know how to speak English’. It is mental ability as it concerns with the speaker’s knowledge of the language. In (2b), ‘I know how to swim’. It is physical ability because it refers to the speaker’s skill in the kind of sports, swimming. In (2c) *can* shows just the (general) ability of the speaker because there is no focus of whether the ability is mental or physical. *Can* in (2d)

demonstrates root possibility instead of ability (or general ability) as the enable condition for the speaker ‘to ride that horse’ does not entirely lie on the speaker’s ability of riding, but also determined by the properties of the horse. For example, if the horse is too wild, then it may affect the speaker’s ability to ride it. In (2e) *can* means neither ability not possibility, it denotes permission. The speaker is asking the listener’s permission for leaving. By analyzing the different meanings of *can* in (2), *can* is re-illustrated in the pathway in (3):



3 Chinese Data of *ho*

(4a) 《國風魏風第九》 葛履 :

糾糾 葛 履 , 可以 履 霜 ?

gau2gau2 got3 geoi3 ho2ji5 lei5 soeng1

wrapped intertwined straw sandals HO_a¹ tread frost

“*Can wrapped feet walk on the frost?*”

摻摻 女 手 , 可以 縫 裳 ?

saam1samm1 neoi5 sau2 ho2ji5 fung4 soeng4

slender female hand HO_a sew clothes

“*Can slender hands sew?*”

(4b) 《春秋繁露》 春秋繁露卷五 :

生 天 地 之 間 , 根 本 微 者 , 不 可 遭 大 風 疾 雨 。

sann1 tin1 dei6 zi1gaan1 gan1bun2 mei4ze2 bat1 ho2 zou1 daai6fung1 zat6 jyu5

live sky land between basically small ones not HO_b suffer big wind fast rain

“*The basically weak ones in the world cannot withstand strong winds and heavy rains.*”

¹ It should be noted that *ho2* and *ho2ji5* are considered to have the same meaning. According to *Lin Yutang dang dai Han Ying ci dian (Online Version)*, *ji5* means “in order to”. When using in sequence with *ho2* to form *ho2ji5*, it literally means “to have the ability in order to” or “to be permitted in order to” do something, which basically means the same as *ho2* alone.

(4c) 《大戴禮記卷第一》 主言第三十九 :

女 可 語 明 主 之 道 與 ?

jyu5 ho2 jyu5 ming4 zyu2 zi1 dou6 jyu5

you HO_c talk bright master GEN way with

“Can you be talked about the way to a brilliant leader with?”

(4d) 《莊子 逍遙遊》:

夏 蟲 不 可 語 冰 。

haa6 cung4 bat1 ho2 jyu5 bing1

summer worm not HO_d talk ice

“Worms in the summer cannot talk about ice.”

(4e) 《春秋穀梁傳》 哀公 :

夏 之 始 可 以 承 春 。

haa6 zi1 ci2 ho2ji5 sing4 ceon1

summer GEN beginning HO_e succeed spring

“The beginning of summer can succeed spring.”

(4f) 《水經注四十卷》 水經注卷十一 :

燕 南 垂 , 趙 北 際 , 惟 有 此 中 可 避 世 。

jin1 naam4seoi4 ziu6 bak1 zai3 wai4jau5 ci2zung1 ho2 bei6 sai3

Yan south hang Zhao north zone only here HO_f escape world

“In the south of Yan, in the north of Zhao, only here can one escape from the world.”

(4g) 《數術記遺》:

今 有 深 坑 , 在 上 看 之 , 可 知 尺 數 已 否 ?

gam1jau5 sam1haang1 zoi6 soeng6hon3zi1 ho2 zi1 cek3 sou2 zi6fau2

now have deep pit LOC above see it HO_g know foot number not

“Now there is a deep pit, by looking it from above, can the depth be known?”

(4h) 《尚書大傳卷四殷傳六》 湯誓 :

此 天 子 之 位 , 有 道 者 可 以 處 之 矣 。

ci2 tin1zi2 zi1 wai6 jau5 dou6 ze2 ho2ji5 cyu2 zi1 ji5

this emperor GEN position person with reason HO_h locate it SFP

“The one with reason can take this position of the emperor.”

(4i) 《春秋繁露》 春秋繁露卷一：
 晉 惡 而 不 可 親。
 zeon3ok3 ji4 bat1 ho2 can1
 Jin fierce CONJ not HO_i be close to
 “Jin is fierce and cannot be got close to.”

4 The pathway of *ho* as permission

In (4a), the speaker implies that wrapped legs and slender hands are too weak, so they are not capable of walking on frost and sewing. Similarly, in (4b) the basically weak ones are physically incapable of withstanding the strong winds and heavy rains. Therefore, in both tokens *ho* represents physical ability.

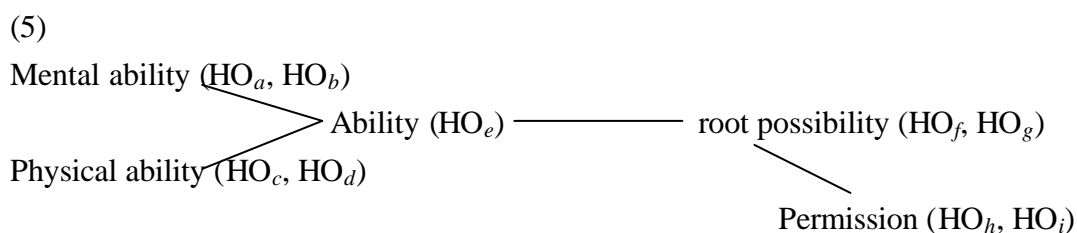
In (4c), whether the listener can talk about the way to a brilliant leader with the speaker depends largely on his knowledge and insight, which are mental abilities. Likewise, in (4d), since worms in the summer die before the season ends, they can never reach the winter and therefore have no knowledge of ice at all. Thus whether they can talk about ice is a matter of mental ability.

In (4e), as the agent is inanimate, *ho* does not represent neither physical nor mental ability, thus it demonstrates a general ability.

In (4f) and (4g), the sentences assume that the agents do possess the ability to perform the actions, yet whether the actions are performed does not depend solely on this ability, nor on any permission from outside, therefore *ho* demonstrates root possibility here.

In (4h), the one with reason is assumed to have the ability to be an emperor, yet whether he can be an emperor depends on whether he is permitted by ‘the sky’. Also in (4i), whether Jin can be got close to depends on whether Jin permits so. Therefore, *ho* represents permission in these two tokens.

The pathway can be charted as in (5) below.



5 Conclusion

By testing the Chinese morpheme *ho* according to the grammaticalisation pathway suggested by Bybee et al (1994), it is found that *ho*, which originally means ‘to know; to know how’ was first grammaticalised from lexical with mental or physical ability to (general) ability, then to root possibility and finally to permission. Since Bybee has found that cross-linguistically ‘the most commonly documented lexical source for ability is a verb meaning ‘to know’ or ‘to know how to’², this mini project echoes with Bybee’s findings while supports the unidirectionality assumption of grammaticalisation.

References

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² According to Bybee et al. (1994:190),

<u>Languages</u>	<u>Sources</u>	<u>Original meanings</u>
Motu	<i>diba</i>	‘to know’, ‘can, be able to’
Danish	<i>kunne</i>	‘know’
Mwera	<i>manya</i>	‘know how to’
Nung	<i>sha</i>	‘to know’