

How Linguistic Notions Formed the Concession During the Grammaticalization Process? A Contrastive Study of the Mandarin Concessive Connector 即使 *jìshǐ* and Its Equivalents in French

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Abstract

*The article treats the most prototypical concessive connector 即使 *jìshǐ* “although” “even if” in Chinese and its equivalents in French based on previous theories and analyses on the two languages. The aim of the present work is to explore the concessive mechanism in two languages that are typologically distant. By relating several crucial linguistic notions such as temporality, hypothesis and causative verbs, our research not only demonstrates the diachronic evolution of the concessive marker 即使 *jìshǐ*, but also highlights its rapprochements with certain French concessive connectors (such as *cependant*, *mêmes*, etc.) from logico-semantic and syntactico-discursive points of view. After consulting various corpora from archaic to contemporary Chinese and French, as well as using technical linguistic methodologies, the article presents surprising similarities in terms of the concessive formation despite the etymological and cultural differences of the two languages.*

Keywords: Concessive connectors, Mandarin, French, hypothesis, temporality, causality

1. Introduction

1.1 Notion of concession in French and in Mandarin

The idea of concession dates to the rhetoric field and becomes more and more precise from medieval and classical eras in French (Soutet, 1990, p. 3–5). It was not until the course of the 19th century that the term concession enters the grammatical lexicon and was defined by the grammarians as a logical relation uniting two propositions. It is not a coincidence that the ancient rhetoricians and grammarians have always listed and studied this rhetorical figure. The concession, which has extremely rich, varied and nuanced means of expression, plays a specific and irreplaceable role in our discourse. It is defined as a two-step argument movement (Morel, 1996, 5): “The speaker begins by recognizing the validity of an argument that he lends to his opponent in the debate. Then he enunciates a counter-argument that comes to restrict the scope or destroy it.”

Mandarin Chinese is an isolating language with a reduced morphology belonging to the Sino-Tibetan languages. Since the dawn of the first systematic work on the Mandarin Chinese’s grammar *Ma Shi Wen Tong* (The grammar of Ma) in 1898, the conjunction, as one of the most important functional categories (also named “empty categories” by the author), was first introduced in an independent chapter. This establishes the importance of its role in the grammatical scope. One of its sub-classifications, concessive conjunctions, is the most problematic category. According to Chinese linguists, the concessive sentence belongs to the complex sentence field whose subordinate has a position opposite to that of the principal. In a concessive phrase, the enunciator provisionally “allows” or “admits” the assertion or hypothesis of the subordinate by using it as a concession in the discourse (J. Li, 1924). In fact, the said “concession” is thus a temporary admission (S. Lü, 1956). This is the reason why some Chinese linguists also called concessive conjunctions “permissive” conjunctions.

However, the concessive link is not restricted to a simple logical relation but is a complex operation. On a logico-causal level, the concession is a cause that should have acted but did not act. The concessive mechanism combines many already complex linguistic notions that are often studied separately by linguists: temporality, intensity, negation, causality, subjectivity, etc. All together, they constitute the concessive operation.

Therefore, it is often said that the concession is a “secondary” or “composed” linguistic concept, and it is almost impossible to find a simple or archaic word expressing the concession in many languages.

1.2 Theoretical research on concession in France and in China

In France, thematic work on concessive connectors was mainly conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, represented by two important theses of M.-A. Morel and O. Soutet, published respectively in 1980 and 1990. These two authors, from lexico-syntactic and diachronic-semantic points of view, study the definitions and explanations of *concession* given by grammarians up to the 20th century, as well as the origins of concessive expressions in the 16th century and their grammaticalization process during history. R. Martin (1987) devoted a chapter to the study of the worlds involved in a concessive relation from the angle of formal semantics. He proposes the “underlying implication” (R. Martin, 1987), a logical mechanism of primacy in the concessive relation: something is expected to arise from an existing situation. H. Gettrup and H. Nölke (1984) are particularly interested in concessive adverbial morphemes in French. Also inspired by “the Geneva School”, P. Blumenthal (1980) and O. Ducrot (1984) deal with several relevant linguistic notions such as adversity and the act of speech in their work. J.-C. Anscombe (1985, 2001) explains in his articles the relations between the concession and the causality, the negation, the condition from logical and argumentative points of view. S. Mellet (2008) dedicates a work that deals, over a wide range of corpora, with concessive connectors in French through the centuries from syntactic and argumentative angles.

In China, researchers have considerably been deepening the properties, constraints, and subdivisions of concessive conjunctions since the embryonic stage of the modern Chinese grammar system. J. Li (1924), one of the founders of Chinese grammar, distinguishes two types of concessional conjunctions. For the first one, represented by 虽然 *suīrán* “despite”, and its various derivatives (such as 虽是 *suīshì* and 虽说 *suīshuō*, whose first morpheme means “despite” and the second morphemes mean respectively “to be” and “to say”), it is a question of introducing an assertion from a certain fact. For the second, represented by 即使 *jìshǐ*, 就是 *jiùshì*, 纵然 *zòngrán* and its derivatives, as well as 哪怕 *nǎpà*, they all mean “although” or “even if” according to the linguistic context. In contrast to “allowing” a certain assertion, this second type of concessive conjunctions is often used as a basis for psychological “presupposition”. L. Wang (1944), who has a very similar point of view, considers that 虽然 *suīrán* “despite” and its derivatives belong to the concessive conjunctions of “real permission”, while the other expressions mentioned above are concessive markers of “hypothetical permission”. According to S. Lü (1956), the clause introduced by 虽然 *suīrán* “despite”, as well as that introduced by 即使 *jìshǐ* “although” or “even if”, are all concessive clauses. For the author, there is a logic in relation to the concessive subordinate: in a sentence in the form of “[Concessive connector] + *q*, *p*” either “the cause of *q* does not produce the consequence of *p*” or “the consequence of *p* nevertheless occurs despite the defect of the cause of *q*”. He listed for the first time another kind of concessive proposition in the form of a concessive conjunction: 就是 *jiùshì* “although” or “even if” whose first morpheme means “immediately”, and the second means “to be”, directly followed by a noun instead of a subordinate with the complete SVO. Since the year 2000, the work on the subject concerns in principle two branches: the uses of concessive conjunctions in the complex sentence from the logico-syntactic point of view, and the grammaticalization of the concessive markers. Important research on the two approaches above include the book by H. Li (2013) on the concession and the relevant issues, and the research by C. Chi and Y. Ling (2008), Z. Li (2017), and K. Wu (2006) on the grammaticalization of certain concessive markers.

Based on previous research and combining theoretical currents on both sides in French and Chinese, we will try to analyze the most typical and frequently used concessive marker in contemporary Chinese: 即使 *jìshǐ* “although” “even if” “if”. We will also try, from a logico-semantic and syntactico-discursive point of view, to highlight their links with French, an Indo-European inflectional language, during the process of grammaticalization of these concessive conjunctions. We will surprisingly notice how these two languages “thicken” their concessive mechanism in a very similar way through the grammaticalization process despite their enormous linguistic and cultural divergences.

2. Concessive marker 即使 *jìshǐ* “although” “even if” and its brief grammaticalization history

即使 *jíshǐ* “although” “even if”, which can be interpreted as the hypothesis connector “if” in some cases as well, is one of the most typical concessive conjunctions in contemporary Chinese. It is often at the top of the clause, followed by a postponed main clause that semantically opposes the logic of the previous one.

Like most concessive markers, 即使 *jíshǐ* is a “composed” or “secondary” connector, and was a syntactic construction combining two morphemes 即 *jí* and 使 *shǐ* in history. 即 *jí* is a polyseme that can act as five different parts of speech: noun, verb, adverb, preposition and conjunction. When it plays the conjunction role, it has either the concessive meaning “although” “even if” (example 1) or the hypothetical meaning “if” (example 2). When used as an adverb, it indicates the temporality of two events that happen very quickly or nearly simultaneously, “at the same time” so to speak (example 3). For instance:

- (1) 公子 即 合 符, 而 晋鄙 不 授
gōngzǐ jí hé fú, ér jìnbǐ bù shòu
 prince even if correspond to commander’s seal but Emperor JIN Neg bestow
 公子 兵 而 复 请 之, 事
gōngzǐ bīng ér fù qǐng zhī, shì
 prince military power on the contrary again request instructions Emperor WEI thing
 必 危 矣。
bì wēi yǐ
 must dangerous TonMk

(Yuwen360.com, 2014)

“Even if the prince showed his royal seal and the tally was verified, Emperor Jin might still not hand over the regime to the prince but request again directions from Emperor Wei (the enemy of the prince), then the situation is going to be dangerous.”

- (2) 即 不 幸 有 方 二 三 千里
jí bù xìng yǒu fāng èr sān qiānlǐ
 if Neg fortunate there is vertically and horizontally Num-two Num-three miles
 之 旱, 国 胡 以 相 恤。
zhī hàn guó hú yǐ xiāng xù
 Gen drought state what use treat aid

(Fanti.dugushici.com, 2015)

“If the unfortunate drought has occurred over two or three thousand miles (scale), what should the state use to relieve (the people)?”

- (3) 秦昭 王 后悔 出 孟尝 君, 求 之 已
qínzhāo wáng hòuhuǐ chū mèngcháng jūn qiú zhī yǐ
 QINZHAO emperor regret liberate MENGCHAGNG AplMk call PronP3Sg already
 去, 即 使 人 驰 传 逐 之。
qù jí shǐ rén chí chuán zhú zhī
 leave immediately let do PronP3 ride horses release the order chase PronP3Sg

(Gushiwen.org, 2011)¹

“Emperor Qinzhao regrets to release Mengchang. He’s willing to call him, but Mengchang has already left. Emperor Qinzhao immediately gave the order to his men to mount their horses and chase him.”

使 *shǐ* is also a polyseme, which can act as noun, verb and conjunction. It is mainly used as a causative verb, meaning “to let (someone) do something” “to make something happen”, but also used as a hypothetical conjunction “if” in archaic corpus:

- (4) 节 用 而 爱 人, 使 民 以 时。
jié yòng ér ài rén shǐ mǐn yǐ shí
 save use and take care of people get working people according to agricultural seasons

(Guoxue.com, 2000)

“Saving financial expenses and taking care of the people, get people working but not delay the time of farming.”

¹Cited by Chi, C., & Ling, Y. (2008): Rangbuliancijishi de yufahua. *Jiangnan daxuexuebao*, 7(2), p. 92.

(5) 向 使 三 国 各 爱 其 地, 齐
 xiàng shǐ sān guó gè ài qí dì qí
 if if Num-three states respectively love Gen national territory State QI
 人 勿 附 于 秦。
 rén wù fù yú qín
 people Neg depend on toward State QIN

(Gushiwen.org, 2011)

“If the people of the three states love their own territories, the people of State Qi do not depend on State Qin.”

即使 *jíshǐ* appeared in historical documents for the first time during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). At this time, 即使 *jíshǐ* was a syntactic construction of two morphemes of different natures: the adverb 即 *jí* “immediately” + the causative verb 使 *shǐ* “to let (someone) do (something)” “to get/have (something) done” (C. Chi and Y. Ling 2008, 92). For example:

(6) 如 此 则 民 怨, 诸侯 惧, 即使 辩武
 rú cǐ zé mín yuàn zhūhóu jù jí shǐ biànwǔ
 like DemPron thus people resentment vassals afraid if let do sophists
 随 而 说 之, 佞 可 徼幸 什 得
 suí ér shuì zhī tang kě jiǎoxìng shí dé
 follow CoordConj persuade Pron maybe can by chance Num-ten obtain
 — 乎?
 yī hū
 Num-one TonPtc

(Guoxue.com, 2000)²

“If you (the emperor) do this, people will be resentful, and vassals will be afraid. If you order sophists to persuade the people and the vassals, you may have one chance out of ten to win their support.”

During the Six Dynasties (220 AD–589 AD), the syntactic construction 即使 *jíshǐ* began to change. We find the combination of the hypothetical conjunction 即 *jí* “if” + the causative verb 使 *shǐ* “to let (someone) do (something)” “to get/have (something) done”. For instance:

(7) 丁掾, 好 士 也, 即使 其 两 目
 dīngyuàn hǎo shì yě jí shǐ qí liǎng mù
 DINGYUAN good man TonPtc if let be AdjPoss Num-two eyes
 盲, 尚 当 与 女。
 máng shàng dāng yǔ nǚ
 blind still should marry daughter

(Guoxue.com., 2000)³

“Dingyuan is such a nice person. If he goes blind, he is still worth marrying my daughter.”

We share the same opinion with C. Chi and Y. Ling (2008, 93) here: if we compare example (7) with example (6), we will observe that what follows 使 *shǐ* in example (6) is a concrete action: allowing/ordering eloquent persons to persuade people and vassals. However, “becoming blind” in example (7) is a hypothetical state. Since this period of the Six Dynasties (220 AD–589 AD), 使 *shǐ* has been expressing “to make someone be in a state” instead of “to have an action done by someone”. Its semantic meaning becomes more and more abstract and indefinite. 即使 *jíshǐ* has intermediate characters between the syntactic form 即 *jí*+ 使 *shǐ* and the hypothetical conjunction 即使 *jíshǐ*.

It is approved by the linguists that the syntactic construction “temporal adverb/hypothetical conjunction 即 *jí*+ 使 *shǐ*” began to grammaticalize towards a concessive conjunction during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). For example:

²Cited by Chi, C., & Ling, Y. (2008). *Ibid.*

³Cited by Chi, C., & Ling, Y. (2008). *Ibid.*, p. 93.

- (8) 即使 有 些 勉强, 也 还 好 慢慢
jíshǐ yǒu xiē miǎnqiǎng yě hái hǎo màn màn
 even though have a little grudgingly also still fine gradually
 央求, 何 至 下手 杀 了 他?
yāngqiú hé zhì xiàshǒu shā le tā
 beg how arrive effectuate kill PtcIAccplAsp P3Sg

(Blogapp.sina.cn, 2003)⁴

“Even though (she) did this a little stubbornly, I could always beg her to do so. How come that I killed her?”

We can observe from this example that 使 *shǐ* plays no longer the role of causative verb: its meaning of “to let (someone) do (something)” disappears. Moreover, semantically, the subjectivity of 即使 *jíshǐ* is reinforced: “she did this a little stubbornly” is no longer an objective result of “to do” but a subjective feeling of the enunciator. In modern Chinese, 即使 *jíshǐ* having finished its grammaticalization process has become a concessive conjunction. 即使 *jíshǐ* often connects two clauses in the form of “即使 *jíshǐ* *q*, *p*”. According to S. Lü (1956, p. 440–442), clause *q* actualizes the concessive hypothesis. On the other hand, F. Xing thinks that the proposition *q* introduced by 即使 *jíshǐ* can represent either a hypothesis or an actualized fact (2001, 440). M. Huang declares, with a more modest opinion, that 即使 *jíshǐ* has two values: “a value of logical concession: the fact introduced in the concession is given as discounted, and a value of concession and hypothesis: the fact introduced in the concession is given as fictitious.” (2005, 192). Therefore, depending on the context, the concessive connector 即使 *jíshǐ* can be translated either by “although” often introducing an actualized fact, or by “even if” introducing a hypothesis. No grammatical element decides the interpretation will go towards “although” or “even if”. For instance:

- (9) 即使 他 很 富有, 他 也 买 不到 幸福
jíshǐ tā hěn fùyǒu tā yě mǎi bú dào xìngfú
 even though/even if P3Sg very rich P3Sg anyway buy Neg happiness
 与 健康。
yǔ jiànkāng
 and health

“He cannot buy happiness and health although he is/even if he is rich.”

- (10) 我们 还 没有 收到 消息, 即使 收到 了, 应该
wǒmen hái méiyǒu shōudào xiāoxi jíshǐ shōudào le yīnggāi
 P3PI yet Neg receive news even though receive PtcIAccplAsp should
 也 不会 是 好 消息。
yě bù huì shì hǎo xiāoxi
 neither Neg Cop good news

“We have not received any news yet (of the war). Even if we have some, I think it will not be good news.”

3. Concession: a combination of temporality, causality and hypothesis

3.1 Concession and temporality

Just as mentioned above, 即 *jí* is a polyseme, which is not only a hypothetical (concessive) conjunction, but also an adverb of time, which means “immediately”. In comparison to French, we can observe here how the language uses temporal construction to serve the concession. This phenomenon is found in the French adverb *pendant*, which means etymologically *pendant ce temps* “during this time” “during that”. The demonstrative adjective insists on the temporal simultaneity of two situations. There is still in contemporary French a slightly literary conjunctive phrase *pendant que*, which is purely temporal (example 11). For example:

- (11) *Cependant que j’ attendais l’ autobus, j’ ai lu mon journal.*
 during the time P1Sg wait for the bus P1Sg Aux read Gen newspaper

“While waiting for the bus, I read my newspaper.”

The phrase *pendant que* does not become concessive in contemporary French. Yet, on the other hand, the adverb *pendant* on the other hand has no longer the temporal value. It became an adversarial circumstantial

⁴Cited by Chi, C., & Ling, Y. (2008). *Ibid.*

morpheme then slipped into the concession. Thus, we can observe an interesting discordance between the adverb of time and the conjunctive phrase here. According to the studies of S. Mellet (2008, 203), the anaphoric morpheme *ce* (“this”) “favors the emergence of a logical relation”, and *cependant* found its use of opposition in the 16th century for the first time. It is a main adverb in French presenting the contrast and the concession. It is thus interpreted by “however” “nevertheless” (example 12) or “all the same” “though” (example 13):

(12) *Les deux chats sont frères. Cependant, ils ont des caractères très différents.*
 the Num-two cats Cop brothers however P3Pl Aux some characters very different

“The two cats are brothers. However, they have very different characters.”

(13) *Le restaurant n’ est pas cher. Le dîner, cependant, est délicieux.*
 the restaurant Neg Cop Neg expensive the dinner though Cop delicious

“The restaurant is not expensive. The dinner, though, is delicious.”

Furthermore, we can also find how the temporal 即 *jí* “immediately” is easily combined with the hypothetical causality marker 使 *shǐ* “to let (someone) do (something)” during the grammaticalization process. In French, this analogous phenomenon is represented by *alors*, which is originally a temporal adverb meaning “then”, and that is gradually used as the consequence conjunction “so”. For instance, in the following example, we employ the temporal adverb *alors* to indicate the relation cause-consequence instead of a hypothetical complex sentence:

(14) *Il pleut, alors je prends mon parapluie.*
 P3Sg raining so P1Sg take Gen umbrella

“It’s raining, so I take my umbrella.”

(15) *S’ il va pleuvoir, je prendrai mon parapluie.*
 if P3Sg Aux rain P1Sg take Gen umbrella

“If it’s going to rain, I’ll take my umbrella.”

3.2 Concession and causality

Through the concessive connector 即使 *jǐshǐ*, we observe that the concession is often associated with the causality idea “to let (someone) do (something)”. According to O. Soutet (1990) and M.-A. Morel (1983), the concession is at first a rhetorical figure. This leads us to think, from a rhetorical point of view, that the speaker abandons an argument to his opponent by “letting” his opponent express himself. We often see the concessive structure in French *certes, j’accepte..., mais...* “admittedly, I accept..., but...”. It is in fact a mechanism of admitting temporarily but to reverse afterward. It could be the reason why causative verbs like 使 *shǐ* are at the heart of the grammaticalization process of concessive connectors.

There is an obvious causal connection in the concession: the concession is a form of causality, which is normally verified but is not verified. When we say the following sentence:

(16) *Bien qu’ il fasse beau, j’ ai pris mon impermeable.*
 even though P3Sg do nice P1Sg aux take Gen raincoat

“Although the weather was nice, I took my raincoat.”

There is a link between the “good weather” and the fact of “having a raincoat”. The expected causality order does not work: what is expected is when the weather is nice people normally do not need to take a raincoat. There is thus an established link between the weather and the type of clothing I wear. Here, the actualized hypothesis (*qu’ il fasse beau* “the weather was nice”) and the concession (*j’ ai pris mon imperméable* “I took my raincoat”) establish together the “abnormal” causality mechanism: with the actualized hypothesis, we are in the possible cause-consequence order that could have been effective; with the concession, we are in the situation where the cause is denied by the fact.

3.3 Concession and hypothesis

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, 即使 *jǐshǐ* represents a concession value “although” “even if” or a hypothesis one “if” in contemporary Chinese. When used as a concessive conjunction, the fact introduced by 即使 *jǐshǐ* is given as either assertive either fictitious.

In contemporary French, the hypothetical concessive marker is primarily represented by *même si* “even if” followed by the indicative mode. However, *si* “if” is not always hypothetical in French. It also has a contrastive value introducing an actualized fact. For example:

(17) *Si Peter est courageux, Paul, lui, est singulièrement paresseux.*
 so PETER Cop brave PAUL P3Sg Cop particularly lazy
 “Peter is so brave. As for Paul, he is particularly lazy.”

This statement insists on the contrast between the braveness of Peter and the laziness of Paul. The link here is not from cause to consequence, but a contrastive one. This usage of *si* has an influence on the interpretation of *même si* “even if”: besides the concessive connector *même si* integrating a hypothetical *si*, there is another one integrating a contrastive *si* introducing an actualized fact that is almost equivalent to *bien que* “although” “even though”. For example:

(18) *Même si j’ étais riche, je n’ achèterais pas une Ferrari.*
 even if P1Sg Cop rich P1Sg Neg buy Neg a FERRARI
 “Even if I were rich, I would not buy a Ferrari.”

(19) *Même s’ il est malade, il vient au cours.*
 although P3Sg Cop sick P3Sg comes to the class
 “Although he is sick, he comes to class.”

Example (18) is typically a hypothetical concessive: the hypothesis presents a cause-consequence link: if I were rich, I would buy a Ferrari. On the other hand, the example (19) can be interpreted differently: even if it is true that he is sick, he nevertheless comes to the class. This is a *si* “if” we can interpret as “if it is true that”. Here, we leave the field of hypothesis to enter the factuality. More examples can be found in historical accounts in which *même si* “even though” is applied to introduce existing events. For example:

(20) *En 1918, même si la France a gagné la guerre, elle n’ en est pas moins affaiblie.*
 in 1918 although the France Aux win the war P3Sg Neg Pron Cop
 Neg minus weakened
 “In 1918, even though it won the war, France was nonetheless weakened.”

No one disputes the statement above because it is an historical fact thus an assertion.

4. Conclusion

In this present paper, we presented our contrastive analyses of the most prototypical concessive marker in contemporary Chinese 即使 *jíshǐ* “although” “even if” as well as its equivalents in French. From logico-semantic and syntactico-discursive points of view, we have not only presented briefly how the concessive marker 即使 *jíshǐ* was formed in a diachronic way, but also highlighted its similarities with French as far as the grammaticalization process is concerned. 即使 *jíshǐ*, which became a concessive conjunction during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), was initially a syntactic construction of two morphemes of different natures: the temporal adverb/hypothetical (concessive) conjunction 即 *jí* + the causative verb/hypothetical conjunction 使 *shǐ*. The study of 即使 *jíshǐ* leads us to analyze how the grammar, no matter the studied languages typologically distant, uses temporality, causality and hypothesis in the composition of concession. To conclude, the concession is a complex logical relationship nourished by an aggregation of simple signs. That may be the reason why, even though many researchers studied the concession in recent years in both Chinese and French, it is constantly attracting the attention of new researchers willing to continue deepening this subject.

Abbreviation Table

Abbreviation Table	
AdjPoss	Adjective possessive
AplMk	Appellation Mark
Aux	Auxiliary
Cop	Copula
CoorConj	Conjunction of coordination
Dem	Demonstrative
Gen	Genitive
Neg	Negation
Num	Number
P1	First Person
P3	Third person
Pl	Plural
Pron	Pronoun
PtclAccplAsp	Particle of accomplished aspect
Sg	Singular
TonPtcl	Tonic Particle

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