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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Analysis of Linguistic Pattern “X Xue” based on Constructional Grammar: Transforming from Grammatical Construction to Rhetorical Construction**

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**ABSTRACT**

Focusing on the trending phenomenon on the internet, this study has generalized the different uses of “X Xue” from a perspective of Constructional Grammar. All data collected from Chinese mainstream social platforms went through a constructional analysis, including constructional meaning, syntactic structure and pragmatic use. According to the study, the linguistic pattern “X Xue” has witnessed a more diversified use. Compared with the traditional use of “X Xue”, the online practice of this phrase implies a sense of dismiss or self-mockery. To explain the change, Liu’s model of grammatical construction and rhetorical construction is employed in the research. In addition, the cognitive mechanisms for the variation of the phrase are also discussed in the essay. Study shows that there are two kinds of projection playing important roles in the process of such transformation. In general, the study thoroughly depicted the motion of “X Xue” in a continuum from grammatical construction to rhetorical one, and tried to explain the potential cognitive motivations behind the development.

**KEYWORDS**

Constructional Grammar; grammatical construction; rhetorical construction; projection; cognitive motivation;

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 15 September 2025

**PUBLISHED:** 04 October 2025

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.10.4

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### **1. Introduction**

Ever since the third revolution of science and technology, computers have become an inseparable part of our life, shaping our way of thinking and acting. And with the development of social media, in which we are allowed to contact others without meeting in flesh, the language we use for communication has witnessed enormous change. Recently, a trending phrase was pervasive on Chinese social media called “Bing Xue”. Unlike the traditional use of “X Xue”, such as “Zhe Xue” (philosophy) or “Yi Xue” (medicine), users of “Bing Xue” often implied ridicule or sarcasm, which is contrary to the original use. In this essay, a constructional approach will be adopted to analyze the formation of such a new application of “X Xue”. Discussion will begin with a detailed observation of the form, semantic meaning and pragmatic features of this idiom. And a cognitive explanation for this trend will be provided in the end. All data used in the essay are quoted from posts on Chinese mainstream social platforms (Bilibili, Weibo and Rednote) or comments below.

### **2. Basic introduction and review of Construction Grammar**

Research of Constructional Grammar started in the 1980s as a result of critics and reviews of Transformational-Generative Grammar. There are four stages of the evolution of CxG in its early development, marked by four linguists, namely Fillmore, Glodberg, Langacker and Croft (Wang, 2011).

Goldberg (1995: 4) proposed a theoretical framework for CxG in his work as: “C is a CONSTRUCTION if def C is a form-meaning pair <Fi, Si> such that some aspects of Fi or some aspects of Si is not strictly predictable from C’s component parts or from other previously established constructions.” And later he expanded the definition of construction from “linguistic patterns” that are not strictly predictable, to predictable linguistic patterns as long as occurring with sufficient frequency. (2005: 6). While another linguist Langacker had different views on the expression of “any linguistic patterns”, which in his opinion should include

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at least two components to be called a construction (1987). In 2001, Croft brought up the theory of Radical Constructional Grammar. She claimed that “constructions can be considered as a similar theoretical kind of representation object as lexical items, albeit syntactically complex and at least partially schematic.” (2001: 16)

Further research of CxG developed with the trend of society and intertwined with other disciplines. According to Niu (2024), recent researches on Construction Grammar from home and abroad has focused on the following six areas: the ontology of constructions (Haspelmath, 2023; Hoffmann, 2022) critiques of classical CG theories (Hilpert, 2019; Cappelle, 2024), the constructional approach to irregular and multimodal constructions (Geka, 2023; Strandberg, 2021; Yang, et al., 2023), the synergy between individual and community grammars (Petré & Anthonissen, 2020), and the connections within constructions (Hong & Ma, 2024; Herbst & Hoffmann, 2018). Among the research hotspots above, the biggest proportion is dedicated to micro-level studies of special constructions, such as special sentence patterns, irregular constructions, and idiomatic constructions. It is natural for micro-level studies of specific patterns to remain dominant in years of researches, considering that idioms studies are too marginal to be generalized and require a large number of examples to enhance our understanding (Fillmore, 1988.)

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1 Discussion of “X Xue” as a construction**

The linguistic pattern “X Xue” is frequently observed on some social media recently, such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu. Followings are examples taken from those platforms:

- (1) 冰学是一门研究网络作家大冰的学问，该领域的学员可以分为新兵蛋子、冰学学士、冰学硕士和冰学博士四个层次，其分布符合金字塔图。

(“bing xue” is a subject that studies the works of online writer Da Bing. Learners of this subject can be divided into rookie, bachelor, master and doctor of “bing xue”, whose amounts display a shape of pyramid.)

- (2) 这张照片，有一些晚学特质在。。。

(This photo exhibits a sense of “wan xue”.)

This pattern consists of a variant constituent X and an invariant one, “xue”. According to online Xinhua Dictionary, “Xue” can be used as a verb or noun. When putting in the back of a two-word structure, “Xue” serves as a noun in most cases. But it is still possible for “xue” to be a verb. For example, in “you xue” and “jiang xue”, it refers to the action of giving lectures; in “hao xue”, it refers to the action of learning. Xue has three different meanings when used as a noun behind the variant constituent. The first one is the place for education, usually referring to schools, such as “shang xue” and “fang xue”. Rather than being strictly distinct from each other, the relationship between the second one and the third one are more of a hyponymy. The general term covers all knowledge that is accessible for human beings, such as “bo xue” and “qiu xue”. Other examples like “wen xue” and “shu xue”, refer to particular branches or subjects under the umbrella of knowledge. The variant constituent also varies when combined with different “xue”. Firstly, it can be a verb when “xue” refers to educational institutions, as in “shang xue”. The verb here should indicate the movement from one place to another. And verb is also intelligible when “xue” refers to knowledge in a broader sense, such as “qiu xue”, which describes the action of acquiring knowledge. Secondly, a noun can be used together with “xue” as long as “xue” belongs to the last situation. And the noun usually tells the topic or the focus of the subject. The third possibility could be that adjective can stand as the variant component, as in the instance of “bo xue”, which reveals the extent of one’s knowledge.

In the pattern “X Xue” that we are discussing in the essay, the invariant part “xue” are only available for nouns, and more specifically for nouns with the intonation of disciplines or subjects. As mainly determined by the property of “xue”, the invariant constituent here has to be a noun, too. By looking up in Xinhua dictionary, the specific combination of “N Xue” refers to the systematic and comprehensive study of the knowledge in one field. It usually has to be a scientific subject that is taught in schools, and is conventionally agreed to be worth learning. The word “N xue” in Chinese has a long history. As in any other areas in the world, the meaning of “N xue” went through a restriction from general knowledge to a clear division of different subjects, such as “wen xue”, “shu xue” and “zhe xue”, and a subject can be subdivided into various branches such as “yu yin xue” and “ju fa xue”. As time went by, the pattern “N xue” kept undergoing a further specification, for example, the scope of one subject can be refined into a particular work of literature or an eminent figure. The study of Chinese classic literature *The Dream of Red Mansions* is generally called “Hong Xue” (Redology), and scholars in this field are called “Hong Xue Jia”. The study of *The Dream of Red Mansions* has developed for hundreds of years since Qing Dynasty, drawing scholars from home and abroad to participate in the research. More and more theories and angles from other disciplines have been adopted to analyze all aspects of the masterpiece, including text, characters, plots, historical background and writer, etc.

(3) 21世纪的红学, 理应在学术意识自觉, 科学理论完善的前提下展开。

(Redoogy in 21<sup>st</sup> century should attach more importance to academic consciousness and comprehensive discipline theory.)

With the development of modern information technology, the tv series and other forms of art rather than books can become the object of study. Since “Zhen Huan Zhuan” began on air in 2011, the series has been attracting more and more audiences, ranging from housewives to university students. The story happened in Qing dynasty, where the heroine struggled to survive in the ruthless Forbidden City. Fans have offered their unique interpretation of the episodes, or their impressions of the characters, and then uploaded them to social medias like Bilibili and Douyin. Thanks to the stream of such platforms, the popularity of Zhen Huan Zhuan doubled compared with its first debut. The creators of such content are called “Zhen Xue Jia” since they are studying the series in a professional way.

(4) 小红书刷到以后给我狂推荐甄学的各种研究[emoji]。

(Xiaohongshu has been bombarding me with loads of posts about “Zhen Xue” after I clicked in one of them.)

Compared with the other ‘X Xue’ above, “Zhen Xue” is less serious and prestigious as a subject. It is not as culture-loaded as classic works thus the so-called “study” is actually more entertaining than academic. Netizens may use the lines of the characters in real life situations to create a sense of humor. Therefore, the memorization of plots and lines of the drama represents the expertise of “Zhen Xue”. The reason behind the current of “Zhen Xue” is due to the intriguing and profound story of the series that reflects many of the problems in modern society. Audiences found themselves resonating with the souls behind the screen. Briefly speaking, the emergence of “Zhen Xue”, resembling other patterns of “N Xue”, is out of appreciation for an object.

The discussion we had so far seems to show that the pattern “X Xue” is overwhelmingly used for positive evaluation, despite the expansion of qualification to be a “subject”. But there still exists a less popular use of “X Xue” as a negative term on the internet. The recently trending phenomenon of calling oneself a “bing xue jia” started at the end of 2023, when most people became nostalgic of the past and shared books they had read in their teenage years. One of the internet users posted a picture of her shelter stacked with books written by Da Bing, which stirred up memories of other millennial netizens. For most of them, Da Bing’s books were famous during their adolescence. His books are full of plausible words but empty in essence, thus received a lot of criticism as his readers got older and had a mature understanding of the world. And “bing xue” refers to the “subject” of studying the works of Da Bing. “bing xue jia” are readers of Da Bing’s books who quoted from excerpts in their post. In the examples above, posters have described their mimic of Da Bing’s sentence structure as a systemic study. They put effort into grasping the key of Da Bing’s writing style and applied those paraphrases in all kinds of situations, as they were learning other scientific subjects.

(5) 用了五年, 无意间发展出了冰学, 其实是有意的, 现在发展的太盛大了, 看着有点害怕, 赶快抽身离开了, 《乖, 再见》。

(It takes me five years to established “bing xue”, and I am doing it on purpose. It is now growing too fast. I am kind of terrified and gonna get out of this. *Good bye, and Be Nice.*)

The first linguistic pattern of “X Xue” dates back in 2018 as “Wan Xue”, which involves another influencer named Wanwan. The agent of this meme was notorious on the internet for being pretentious. She usually posted photos to brag about her fortune and taste in art. But her high-profile lifestyle inevitably disclosed the fact that she was neither rich nor elegant as she assumed. Therefore, her words were often quoted by netizens in a sarcastic way. There was even a forum in Douban for people to discuss the scandals or the speech she made in public, until the forum was accused of being offensive and reported by the socialite.

From the examples of “bing xue” and “wan xue” above, we can see that users of such phrase are not actually fans who admire them, but rather opposed to their personalities, as one of the “wan xue jia” said: “We are studying her (Wanwan) words and behavior because we try to avoid being her.” The dominant linguistic patterns of “X Xue” on the internet basically play the same role of irony now, by using which speakers reveal their negative attitudes toward someone or something.

### **3.2 From Grammatical Construction to Rhetorical Construction**

Normally, the construction “X Xue” stands as a noun when uttered in sentences. But the meaning of the construction becomes unpredictable after the restriction of positive value has been cancelled in online catchphrase. As the founder of Constructional Grammar Goldberg declared in her paper, the key factor to determine a construction is unpredictability. Whether a structure is qualified as a construction depends on its unpredictability from its components or other preexisting patterns (1995). But the criterion for construction has received many doubts since it came out. Lu proposed a question in his book: what endowed meanings to constructions if the entire constructional meaning is unpredictable? (2016) Lately, Goldberg herself made some amendments to her works by expanding the scope of construction. To solve the problem, many scholars have provided their understanding from diverse angles.

One widely accepted explanation is that construction is not strictly unpredictable. There are several causes may influence the properties of construction during use. According to Liu (2010), constructions can be classified into grammatical and rhetorical ones, which serve as the end of a continuum. Grammatical construction refers to a structure that is predictable, or unpredictable as it is, the use of such structure has been conventionally accepted as a grammar. Rhetorical constructions, on the other hand, are patterns that are unpredictable, and the unpredictable meaning has not yet fixed. The two kinds of constructions are not necessarily adversarial at all time. From the explanation of the two kinds of construction we can see that, the unpredictability of constructions is rather flexible than fossilized. Once the unpredictable component of a structure has been recognized during repeated use, a rhetorical construction shifts into a grammatical one. “X Xue” in Chinese began with a predictable meaning of positive evaluation. The most original use of “X Xue” like “wen xue” or “shu xue” refers to scientific subjects with a systematic framework for research. And then a looser standard for subjects is employed, which results in the new application for “X Xue”. For example, “Zhen Xue” is accepted as a metaphorical use of the structure. Users of this phrase tend to express their love for the show by comparing “Zhen Huan Zhuan” to a subject that is worth exploration. But the development of “X Xue” does not follow the consistent path of specification, the latest employment is a turning point of the appraisal value for the construction. “X Xue” is no longer exclusive for positive comments. “Bing Xue” and “Wan Xue” suggested that negative emotions can also be attached to the expression.

The course of “X Xue”’s transformation is an exemplification of the idea that grammatical construction may be the end of rhetorical construction, and rhetorical construction is the origin of the grammatical construction (Liu, 2010). As we mentioned above, the ironic use of “X Xue” is less popular now and mostly used informally on the internet. Since such use has not been accepted officially, others cannot fully understanding the meaning we try to convey, or may take it wrong somehow. The attitude behind the pattern become unclear, thus making the meaning unpredictable. However, if the structure “X Xue” attracts much attention in the future, and is frequently used in both negative and positive context, the appraisal value of it will be assumed blurred by default in people’s minds. After reinforcement from time to time, a negative intonation will be added into the original meaning of “X Xue”, thus creating a new structure grammatically. At the same time, “X Xue” becomes predictable again as it can be predicted as inclusive for all attitudes.

### **3.3 Cognitive Motivation of “X Xue”**

Construction as a special linguistic pattern has been noticed and studied by scholars from home and abroad. The reasons behind this variation of language are one of the hot topics in this area. The need for expression is always the drive for humans to derive more words or phrase. But due to the economy of language itself and many other physical or psychological restrictions of human being, it is much easier to endowed existing linguistic patterns with new meanings than creating new expression. By broadening their potential meanings, those linguistic pattern become more powerful and more applicable. However, there’s no stipulation declared to promote the novel use of an expression, which suggests that the process of infusing new intonation to the old frame may not happen easily as it sounds, but involves the complicated cognitive mechanisms in people’s mind. From a cognitive point of view, human’s understanding of new things depends on their own experiences (Lackoff, George, Johnson & Mark, 1980). That is to say, by linking the similarities between new information and existing knowledge in minds, people can keep processing all things they newly encounter until the information is fully absorbed. The generalization of “X Xue” during use is also the shift from grammatical constructions to rhetorical ones. Grammar is differentiated from other language use by humans on purpose, for structures of grammar are related to situations that we are most familiar with. For convenience, we tend to select them out from a list of grammar rather than creating one every time we need. On the contrary, rhetorical constructions are mostly used on unique or rare occasions. For instance, “Bing Xue” is commonly used as mockery on the internet. How can our brains reconcile the different uses of the same structure? A dominant explanation for the phenomenon is that projection bridges the gap between grammar and rhetoric (Goldberg, 2006; liu, 2009; lu, 2009; Wang, 2013). Liu put forward that there are two kinds of projection that allow our minds to rhetorically process new experience (2010).

The first projection is actually the projection of the relation between the speaker and the hearer in the context. When conveying new information, the speaker will choose expressions that he or she believes to be intelligible for the hearer. In this sense, the hearer is assumed to be familiar with the use of such expressions. In the following example, the speaker expected the viewers of the post to know that “Bing Xue” was a subject so that working hard on it could make sense. And by referring to the traditional use of “X Xue” such as “wen xue”, “shu xue”, the hearer can basically grasp the idea of “Bing Xue” as a systematic study, which allows the conversation to be fulfilled.

- (6) 即使身在洗浴中心，也要研读冰学[emoji]。  
(Even in spa I am still studying “Bing Xue”.)

The second projection cannot happen by nature but through imposing constructional meanings on the construction components. Traditionally, projection occurs only when inputs bear some similarities and are categorized in the same domain. If two different or even adversary elements are forced into the same structure, the constructional meaning must be loaded onto one of them at first. In the case of “Wan Xue”, which studies every move of the influencer, the object of study is far from the basic condition for a subject. No one seems to benefit from exploring her infamous image. But the combination of the notorious influencer and a research topic once triggered an internet sensation in 2018. Despite her act, netizens imposed the meaning of worth learning to her as follows:

- (7) 人还是要多学习，哪怕是学学晚学，秀戒指的方式也不会如此生硬。  
(People need to learn as much as they can, even learning “Wan Xue” can make you look much natural when showing off your ring.)

#### 4. Conclusion

Constructional Grammar as an emerging branch of Cognitive Linguistics, was developed during the critics and challenges towards Transformative-Generative theory. It is initially adopted to explain the irregular use of language which is overlooked by TG grammar. By integrating theories of other fields into the framework, CxG has thrived into a cross-disciplinary subject, which enhances the adaptability of the theory. In recent research, CxG is wildly employed to analyze marginal linguistic phenomenon, such as idioms or catchphrase online. This study, through a diachronic analysis of “X Xue”, hopefully can shed some light on the following research on minor language use. But due to the subjectivity of the researcher and inadequate statistics, the research of “X Xue” is still much open for further discussion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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