ABSTRACT

Chinese locatives are highly polysemous words. They describe the positions of an entity in relation to a reference entity and their spatial representation may vary depending on the context. From a synchronic and diachronic point of view, the polysemous characteristic of Chinese locatives can be a result of grammaticalization, lexical conversion etc, or simply due to cognitive effects. Apart from grammatical and syntactic rules, space cognition too influences the way Chinese locatives are use in the language. Through historical and current evidence, this research project investigates both the meaning and usage of five highly polysemous Chinese locatives, namely “miàn (面), biān (边), jìn (近), yuǎn (远)” and “jiān (间)”, in relation to semantic and cognitive effects.

The spatial meaning of “miàn” (lit. ‘surface, side’) refers to the surface of an entity, and through the evolution process of affixation, “miàn” can be seen to be suffixed after other monosyllabic locatives to form a disyllabic locative to express a relative direction or position. Likewise, “biān” (lit. ‘border, next to, side’) too has undergone a semantic change due to the evolution process of affixation. Apart from
referring to the border of an entity and the space next to an entity, "bian" can also be used as an affix in the structure of "direction+bian" to express a particular direction or position.

The spatial meaning of "jìn" (lit. 'near, nearer') and "yuān" (lit. 'far, farther away') can be used to express the relative position of entity in either motion or motion-less state. The nominal usage of "jìn" and "yuān" represents the distance of two or more motion-less entities, while the verbal meaning of "jìn" and "yuān" expresses the changes in distance between two or more entities in motion state.

At first, "jiān" (lit. 'gap, inside, between, among') is used to indicate a gap found in an entity. After which, "jiān" too can be used to refer to the space inside a reference entity, between two reference entities and among some/many reference entities.

The five Chinese locatives mentioned in this thesis are placed in a universal context by comparing them with the universal "spatial" words proposed in Natural Semantic Metalanguage. The purpose of this comparison is to highlight both the sino-centricity and universality of these five locatives that exists in Chinese language.