

The Diachronic Evolution of Fanzheng into a Versatile Mandarin Discourse Marker

Kaiwen Wu*

*School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen,
Guangdong, China*

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: Based on the theory of grammatisation, this study systematically examines the diachronic evolution path and synchronic pragmatic functions of the Chinese discourse marker “*Fanzheng*” from verbs (“set things right”) to modal adverbs (“anyway”) and then to multifunctional discourse markers. Through quantitative analysis of the interaction patterns of 8,385 cases of the CCL corpus of Peking University (with adverbs/discourse markers accounting for 91.8%) and 24 pieces of natural spoken language, it was found that its pragmatic function is highly dependent on the position of the discourse wheel: The starting position of the talk wheel realizes topic switching and mitigates negative evaluations, the middle position avoids position conflicts and serves as a filling and delaying strategy, and the last position hands over the talk wheel and weakens the strength of assertions. This “location-function” correspondence mechanism reveals the deep interaction between the syntactic process and real-time interaction. It not only deepens the dynamic evolution theory of Chinese discourse markers but also provides a new perspective for the functional differentiation design of second language teaching and cross-language comparative studies.

Keywords: *Fanzheng*; Discourse Marker; Grammaticalization; Pragmatic Functions

1. Introduction

Fanzheng is a Mandarin discourse marker with the literal meaning ‘back-front.’ It is initially used as a verb to indicate that a person or thing is returning to the correct path [1]. This verb is coined with another verb, Boluan (Boluan *Fanzheng*, ‘bringing order out of chaos’), to refer to the sociopolitical reform period in the 1970s of China. In daily conversations of Mandarin

speakers, *fanzheng* is used as a modal adverb that adds an affirmative tone to a statement. The Peking University CCL online corpus has 8385 tokens of *fanzheng*, among which only 686 items of *fanzheng* are used as a verb, and the remaining 7699 items of *fanzheng* are all used as modal verbs (see Table 1). *Fanzheng*, as a modal adverb, carries the meaning of ‘anyway,’ ‘in any case,’ or ‘all the same.’ More recent studies have shown that *fanzheng* has evolved from an adverb to a discourse marker with various intersubjective uses [1,2]. This essay aims to review the diachronic change in *fanzheng* from 1980 to 2021, namely, how it has undergone semantic change and acquired various pragmatic functions.

Table 1. Tokens of *Fanzheng* in Peking University CCL Online Corpus

Category	Definition	Quantity	Proportion
Modal adverb form of <i>fanzheng</i>	Anyway/in any case/ all the same	7699	91.8%
Verb form of <i>fanzheng</i>	A person or thing is returning to the correct path	686	8.2%
Total		8385	100%

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Fanzheng* as a Modal Adverb

Fanzheng, it is an adverb with multiple meanings and also a hot topic of research among contemporary scholars. Lú [3] first labeled *fanzheng* as a modal adverb that carries two functions. First, when it is used at a clause-medial position, it can show that the statement following it is unchangeable under any condition. Second, when it is used in a clause-initial position, it can add an affirmative tone to a statement that supports another point. The two sentences below [3] exemplify these two functions.

a) buguan ni zenme shuo,

no-matter-what you how say
fanzheng ta bu daying
FZ he not agree
'No matter what you said, he did not agree **in any case.**'

b) **fanzheng** bu yuan, zanmen jiu
FZ not far we just
zou zhe qu ba!
walk PROG go PRT
'It's not far **anyway**, let's just walk there.'

In example a), *fanzheng* is used to indicate that the person (he) the speakers are talking about will not agree in any case, no matter what they say. Here, *fanzheng* is used at a clause-medial position to emphasize the invariability of the outcome. In contrast, the use of clause-initial *fanzheng* in example b) adds a more affirmative tone to the speaker. The speaker uses *fanzheng* to minimize the perceived effort or concern about the distance, therefore making the suggestion of walking more reasonable and justifiable.

Lǚ's[3] research provides a foundation for the academic study of *fanzheng* as a modal adverb. However, one problem with his research is that it restricts the unit of analysis to the confines of the sentence and does not take into account the influence of larger conversational structures on meaning-making [2]. Building on Lǚ's findings, Wang [4] based her research on a dataset of 21 segments of conversations containing 44 *fanzheng* tokens. Her findings highlight the epistemic modality of *fanzheng*, showing that Mandarin speakers use it to "establish speaker stance before what follows it for the recipient to align themselves to the actions" [4].

2.2 *Fanzheng* as a Pragmatic Marker

Since 2008, analysis of *fanzheng* as a pragmatic marker has begun to emerge. Based on an interactional linguistic approach, researchers have found that *fanzheng* is no longer only used as a modal adverb but also serves the function of helping organize discourse and signaling the speaker's attitude. Dong [5] thoroughly examined the process of semantic bleaching of *fanzheng* by looking into the notion of grammaticalization [6]. He contends that *fanzheng* has lost its syntactic freedom and has been grammaticalized into a discourse marker over the past decades. Nowadays, Mandarin speakers use *fanzheng* frequently in conversation to organize speech and indicate disaffiliative thoughts. However, his definition of the

discourse function of *fanzheng* has been criticized for being ambiguous and based on an impressionistic description [7].

Based on 3000 tokens of *fanzheng* selected from different Chinese corpora, Wang [8] adds that *fanzheng* can also be used as a conclusive pragmatic marker to introduce a final statement or result. According to Wang [8], *fanzheng* is used by speakers at turn-final position to draw final conclusions, make definite statements, and summarize the points being made. Tian [9] also calls for attention to the sequence-closing function of *fanzheng*. Besides closing a turn, Tian argues that *fanzheng* can also be used as a topic-resumption device at a clause-initial position to continue an interrupted utterance.

Gao and Tao's [2] study provides a more holistic view of the pragmatic function of *fanzheng* by analyzing 24 casual Mandarin telephone conversations. Using conversational analysis, Gao and Tao illustrate that *fanzheng* can be used in all turn-initial, turn-medial, and turn-final positions, serving different interactional functions. In addition, they also take into account the prosodic feature of each token of *fanzheng* to find out whether its function differs when used as an independent prosodic unit or as part of a larger Turn-Constructional-Unit (TCU).

2.3 Turn-Initial *Fanzheng*

Gao and Tao [2] suggest that *fanzheng* is used at the turn-initial position, either in the Second Pair Part in a QA sequence or in the First Pair Part in an assessment, request, or advising sequence. It is used to direct the conversation to a slightly different but relevant topic. Below is an example from Gao and Tao's study. Speaker A is asking Speaker B how long she plans to breastfeed her baby.

12 A: wei dao ji ge yue
feed till how-many CL month
ne, xiang
PRT think
'How long will you breastfeed, you think?'

13 B: e::: ban nian?
Um half year
'Um half a year?'

14 huozheshi::: haiya
or-COP INT
wo xiang keneng gan dao:
I think perhaps do till:
'Or:::, well I think perhaps do till:'

15 dao ta zai kan qingkuang'er ba
till it again see situation PRT

‘Till we see how it goes.’

16 A: o:.

mm

‘Mm.’

17 B: **fanzheng**::,

FZ

‘Anyway’

18 (0.14) ta xianzai ye huai zhe ne,
she now also bad PROG PRT

(0.14) ‘She is quite picky now.’

In this example, *fanzheng* is used after the closing of the current question-answer sequence (line 16) and initiates a relevant but new telling action of how her baby behaves (line 18). *Fanzheng* in line 17 is placed at a turn-initial position to start a new topic. It is prosodically separated from the rest of the Turn Construction Unit, as indicated by the prolonged final syllable (*fanzheng*::), the short pause after it, and the pitch reset between the ending of *fanzheng* and the beginning of the next unit ta ‘she’ (see Figure 1). According to Gao and Tao [2], this type of prosodically detached token of *fanzheng* is used as a conversation management device to pivot the conversation in a different direction. Besides the topic-shifting function, *fanzheng* here also acts as a mitigator or softener of a negative evaluation of the stance subject (her baby). By using *fanzheng*, the speaker downplays the negativity and makes her evaluation of the baby more of a joke. Therefore, turn-initial *fanzheng* has more than one pragmatic function: it can shift the conversation to a new but relevant topic and mitigate the negative evaluation of the stance object.

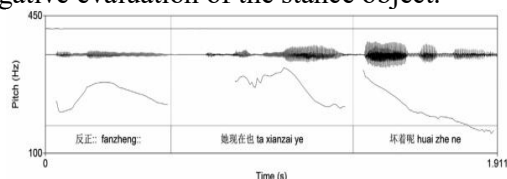


Figure 1. Prosodic Feature Associated with a Detached Token *Fanzheng*

2.4 Turn-Medial *Fanzheng*

Turn-medial *fanzheng* are used to mitigate the speaker’s disaligned or disaffiliative stance, so as to show politeness and maintain interpersonal harmony in the conversation [10]. They can be either prosodically attached or detached from the TCU, as shown in the two examples of *fanzheng* below. In this conversation, speakers A and B are talking about the latest situation of immigration to America. A thinks that there is a recent trend of anti-immigration.

67 A: ranhou ban H one ye yao:,
then do H one also will

yao, **fanzheng** dou yan ma,
will, **FZ** all strict PRT

‘And the application for H-one also will, will,
anyway be all strict.’

68 yeshi fan de hen lihai de..
also-COP oppose CM very fierce PRT

‘The anti-immigration is also very fierce.’

69 B: a na ye-, (.085) **fanzheng**:,
‘Yeah that also- **FZ**

‘Yeah that also, **anyway**.’

70 (.15) jiushi cong nage, e,
just-COP from that um

(0.5) baifenbi lai shuo dehua,

71 ta shijishang yong bu wan de shi,
it actually use not finish PRT true

‘It actually cannot be used up true.’

Here, the first *fanzheng* (line 67) functions as a pragmatic marker to convey the speaker’s stance toward the strictness of immigration in the U.S. The speaker uses ‘*fanzheng* it will be strict’ instead of ‘it will be strict’ to emphasize his acceptance of the strictness as an inevitable fact, thereby signaling a detached attitude. The repeated yao (will) prefacing *fanzheng* indicates that the speaker wants to explain the detailed process of H1 but doesn’t know how to form the words. The use of *fanzheng* therefore allows the speaker to avoid going into further detail and imply that the outcome is already self-evident.

The second *fanzheng* used by speaker B possesses a different function. It attenuates Speaker B’s disaffiliative stance toward Speaker A’s evaluation of immigration in the U.S. Knowing that his stance is different from Speaker A’s, Speaker B uses *fanzheng*’s self-active correction approach to change his previous viewpoint in order to avoid potential position conflicts. Moreover, since the second *fanzheng* is also prosodically detached from the TCU, as indicated by the pause prefacing it, it can also be treated as a filler word or placeholder to buy time for the speaker. In short, when *fanzheng* is used in a turn-medial position, it can either be used to avoid elaboration or prevent potential disaffiliation.

2.5 Turn-Final *Fanzheng*

Chinese modal adverbs such as *fanzheng* are usually placed in the pre-verbal position [11]. The post-verbal placement of adverbs often results in so-called ‘inverted sentences.’ These changes do not alter the meaning of the sentence

but stylistically and emotionally add colors to the sentence [12]. Beeching and Detge's [13] study shows that the continuation of TCU in the external expression layer of RP is closely related to concessions and invitation responses. Similarly, turn-final *fanzheng* also carries interactional functions, as shown in the excerpt below, where speaker B explains to speaker A what he does at work.

01 B: ranhou ceyang ne, jiushishuo,
afterwards sample PRT that-is-to-say,
cong yiqi.shang du yi ge shu,
from device-up read one CL number
'Then as for the sampling, that is, reading a
number from the device,

02 A:[o.

mm

[Mm.

03 B: dui, ranhou juti suan, nage:,
right then specific calculate that
'Right, then to calculate specifically, that,'

04 (2.0) e:,
Um

(2.0) 'um,'

05 **fanzheng** jiushi suan- suan
FZ just-COP calculate calculate
chu gezhonggeyang de,
out different-kinds AM
'Anyway just work, work out different kinds of,'

06 (0.8) youyong de shu
useful AM number
lai ba (.) **fanzheng**

come PRT **FZ**
(0.8) 'Useful numbers anyway'

07 A: o:.

mm

Mm:.

In this conversation, speaker B sensed speaker A's disinterest in his description (as shown in 'Mm' in line 2). The first clause-initial *fanzheng* is used as a turn-yielding cue to signal the speaker's intention to conclude his speech on his work. It indicates that the speaker is generalizing or trivializing the explanation. Moreover, *fanzheng* is also used after the long pause and hedge marker 'um' in line 4 to maintain the conversational flow.

The second *fanzheng* is placed at the clause-final position, after the sentence-final particle 'ba', to show the epistemic modality of uncertainty. The post-positioned *fanzheng* also acts as a turn-yielding and response-inviting cue to engage the recipient. This function has been discussed by Wang [8], in which *fanzheng* works as a

pragmatic conclusive marker. In this example above, the turn-final *fanzheng* is used by speaker B to wrap up the information and pass the turn to another speaker. Upon hearing it, speaker A immediately responds with 'mm' in line 7, which further proves the response-inviting nature of turn-final *fanzheng*. In addition, another function of turn-final *fanzheng* is to downplay or trivialize the preceding discourse so as to mitigate the potential communication impasse [14]. In short, turn-final *fanzheng* carries interactional functions. It adds an informal tone to the speech, reducing tension and making the interaction more casual.

3. Conclusion

This study focused on examining the function of *fanzheng*, a versatile Mandarin discourse marker that has undergone significant semantic bleaching over the past decades. As a modal adverb, *fanzheng* is mainly used as a deterministic marker, adding an affirmative tone to oral expression. It is also used to signal that the statement following it is unchangeable under any condition. As a pragmatic marker, *fanzheng* performs various functions depending on its position within the sentence. It can be used to shift the topic, avoid elaboration, conclude final statements, or invite responses from the recipient. It also serves as a mitigation strategy to soften the negative evaluations of stance objects, attenuate speakers' disaffiliating stance, or downplay the statements to avoid potential conflict. While the mitigation effects of *fanzheng* have been thoroughly explored in prior research, the degree to which these mitigation effects vary based on their syntactic position remains underexplored. Therefore, a potential area for further study on the pragmatic function of *fanzheng* is to compare the mitigation effects of *fanzheng* in different sentence positions. Such research could deepen our understanding of its versatile pragmatic functions and contribute to the study of Mandarin discourse markers.

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