

From lexical expression to discourse marker: the evolution and formation mechanisms of *ni zhidao*

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Abstract. The discourse marker *ni zhidao* ("you know") has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Previous studies have extensively discussed its functions, but relatively little attention has been paid to its evolutionary trajectory and formation mechanisms. Based on a large body of corpus data and within the framework of synchronic grammaticalization theory, this paper provides a detailed investigation of the evolutionary process, formation mechanisms, and motivations for the development of *ni zhidao*. The findings show that *ni zhidao* develops into a discourse marker after undergoing lexicalization and grammaticalization. Its evolutionary trajectory can be summarized as follows: non-subjectivity → subjectivity → discourse marker. The formation of the discourse marker *ni zhidao* is mainly driven by changes in its syntactic environment and by semantic conventionalization. Its motivations for evolution include subjectification, intersubjectivity, and high-frequency use. By revealing the evolutionary trajectory of *ni zhidao* from the perspective of synchronic grammaticalization, this study offers a useful reference for research on the evolution of other discourse markers.

Keywords: *ni zhidao*, discourse marker, formation mechanism, motivation for evolution

1. Introduction: previous studies on *ni zhidao*

1.1. Explanations of *zhidao* in dictionaries

In authoritative dictionaries, *zhidao* ("know") is generally treated as a multifunctional verb that can take various types of objects [1]. Meng Cong et al.'s *Dictionary of Chinese Verb Usage* defines the basic lexical meaning of *zhidao* as follows: to have knowledge of a fact; to have an understanding of a principle; to understand. *Zhidao* may take three types of objects: nominal objects, verbal objects, and clausal objects [2].

1.1.1. Nominal object

For example:

(1) The policeman watched the two men walk away and then cursed, "Rascals! One day I will make you know my severe".¹

¹ The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the CCL corpus.

1.1.2. Verbal object

For example:

(2) Although there are some good doctors nowadays, there are only one or two among a hundred. The rest only know how to earn money; how would they care about other people's lives?²

1.1.3. Clausal object

For example:

(3) At that time Menelaus had also heard of a man named Achilles, but he knew that Achilles' mother had hidden him away and did not know where he was at present, so he entrusted a king to go and search for him.³

1.2. Previous studies on *ni zhidao*

Tao Hongyin was the first to examine the evolution of the *zhidao* construction and related forms in spoken interaction from three dimensions: phonology, grammar, and discourse features. Tao argues that *ni zhidao* as a whole is an emerging discourse marker whose primary function is to regulate interaction among participants in conversation. Building on Tao's study, Liu Liyan offers a comprehensive examination of *ni zhidao* and identifies three usage patterns of *ni zhidao* as well as the characteristics of related *ni zhidao*-type constructions [3]. Zhang Congyan, through an analysis of the different usage patterns of *ni zhidao* *ma*, concludes that it functions to remind the addressee and attract the addressee's attention [4]. Shan Yi further investigates the pragmatic functions and formation mechanisms of *ni zhidao*-type discourse markers on the basis of previous research [5].

Although there has been considerable research on *ni zhidao* and related forms, two problems remain. First, previous studies have not adequately distinguished among different discourse-marker forms such as *ni zhidao*, *ni zhidao ma*, and *ni zhidao ba*, but have instead grouped them together for analysis, which has resulted in relatively coarse-grained conclusions. Second, existing studies have mainly focused on the pragmatic functions of *ni zhidao* as a discourse marker, while few scholars have examined its evolutionary trajectory. Therefore, this paper focuses specifically on *ni zhidao* and, based on synchronic grammaticalization theory, investigates its evolutionary process as well as the formation mechanisms and motivations behind its development as a discourse marker.

This paper argues that the *ni zhidao* construction in Modern Chinese has undergone a process of lexicalization and grammaticalization: it has developed from a non-subjective form to a subjective form, and finally into a discourse marker. Its evolutionary mechanisms mainly include the influence of syntactic environment, semantic conventionalization, and reanalysis. Its motivations for evolution include subjectification, intersubjectivity, and high-frequency use.

2. The lexicalization and grammaticalization of *ni zhidao*

2.1. Non-subjective *ni zhidao*

"Non-subjectivity" means that, in actual use, *ni zhidao* expresses only propositional meaning. The pronoun *ni* ("you") refers to a specific individual, and *zhidao* is a full lexical verb with concrete lexical meaning. At this stage, *ni zhidao*, functioning as a subject-predicate phrase, is commonly used to form general interrogative

² The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the CCL corpus.

³ The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the CCL corpus.

sentences. It may appear either before or after its object. For example:

(4) One or two taels of silver, one string of cash, four strings of cash—this one is light, that one is heavy. If you do not know its weight, weigh it on a scale.⁴

(5) I heard that gaokao scores can be checked these days. Do you know what score he got?⁵

In examples (4) and (5), *ni zhidao* occurs before the object "its weight" and after the object "what score he got", respectively. In both cases, it works together with other components of the sentence to express interrogative meaning.

As a subject-predicate phrase, *ni zhidao* may also form rhetorical questions. In such cases, *ni zhidao* often appears after its object. For example:

(6) But who can say clearly what will happen in the future? Do you know what may happen tomorrow? ... Everything in the future is unknown and risky.⁶

In example (6), *ni zhidao* appears after the object "what may happen tomorrow". Although the sentence takes the form of a question, it is in fact rhetorical. The subsequent context shows that the rhetorical question is intended to convey the meaning "You do not know what may happen tomorrow".

In addition, *ni zhidao* as a subject-predicate phrase may also be used in declarative sentences. Similarly, *ni zhidao* may appear either before or after its object. For example:

(7) If you know the answer to this question, please tell me.⁷

(8) You know his academic situation. If things continue like this, he may not even be admitted to an undergraduate program.⁸

In the interrogative, rhetorical, and declarative sentences formed by the subject-predicate phrase *ni zhidao*, *zhidao* functions as the main verb of the sentence, while *ni*, as a personal pronoun, has an actual referential meaning and refers to a specific addressee in context. *Ni zhidao* carries no subjective coloring; it has only propositional meaning and combines with other sentence components to form questions, express rhetorical questions, or state facts.

2.2. Subjective *ni zhidao*

Consider the following two examples:

(9) I am sorry, you know that I am just this blunt! I have no reason at all to go with you, a cripple, to take part in a match!⁹

(10) Buffalmacco, you know how fond Calandrino is of petty advantages. If someone else pays the bill, he drinks one cup after another.¹⁰

Although *ni zhidao* in examples (9) and (10) has the same form as the examples discussed above, its usage differs in two significant respects. First, *ni zhidao* carries the speaker's subjective coloring. Second, the sentence in which *ni zhidao* occurs is generally exclamatory and is used to express the speaker's strong

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⁵ The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the daily conversations collected by the author.

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¹⁰The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the CCL corpus.

emotion.

In example (9), the speaker does not use *ni zhidao* to indicate that the addressee "knows" the matter in question. Rather, the speaker uses it to tell the addressee the fact that "I am very blunt" and to foreshadow the act of refusing to play football. The usage is therefore strongly subjective. In example (10), the context shows that the speaker does not use *ni zhidao* to state whether the addressee knows the content of the object clause. Instead, the speaker uses *ni zhidao* to highlight how fond Calandrino is of petty advantages and thus to express an exclamatory meaning. In exclamatory expressions formed with subjective *ni zhidao*, it often co-occurs with degree expressions such as *duo*, *duome*, and *zheme*.

2.3. The discourse marker *ni zhidao*

In addition to the non-subjective and subjective uses discussed above, the corpus also contains a large number of cases in which *ni zhidao* is used as a discourse marker. For example:

(11) Lu Yu: Too young at that time. Wang Jie: In fact, almost the whole family went crazy. Her uncles and other relatives were all doing things, and they almost wanted to cut me down, you know.¹¹

(12) Mr. Holmes, that is quite right. You know, I was extremely busy this afternoon. Have you read about the Yoxley case in the evening paper?¹²

(13) He said, "I am self-taught. But that is not entirely accurate. You know, when I was in high school, the teacher who taught us mathematics was Yan Shushi".¹³

Schiffrin argues that discourse markers generally have the following properties: functionally, they are connective; semantically, they are non-truth-conditional; syntactically, they are optional and do not affect the grammaticality of the utterance; in terms of grammatical distribution, they are independent and do not form a grammatical unit with adjacent elements; and phonologically, they are identifiable through pauses and pitch contours [6].

We find that *ni zhidao* in examples (11)–(13) basically meets Schiffrin's criteria for discourse markers. The referential meaning of *ni* is no longer definite; rather, it refers broadly to the addressee or to a group of addressees. The lexical meaning of *zhidao* has been bleached. As a whole, *ni zhidao* has no syntactic connection with adjacent elements and can be omitted without affecting the syntactic well-formedness or truth-conditional meaning of the proposition. Its syntactic position is flexible: it may occur sentence-initially, sentence-medially, or sentence-finally. Phonologically, there is a certain pause between *ni zhidao* and adjacent elements. Therefore, this type of *ni zhidao* is classified here as a discourse marker.

The above analysis shows that, in Modern Chinese, *ni zhidao* can be divided into at least three types according to usage: non-subjective *ni zhidao*, subjective *ni zhidao*, and the discourse marker *ni zhidao*.

3. Formation mechanisms and motivations for the evolution of the discourse marker *ni zhidao*

3.1. Formation mechanisms

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Ni zhidao has undergone the following evolutionary process: non-subjective *ni zhidao* → subjective *ni zhidao* → discourse marker *ni zhidao*. The evolution and development of most discourse markers in Chinese involve lexicalization and grammaticalization, as can be seen in forms such as *shui zhidao* ("who knows") and *ni bu zhidao* ("you don't know"). Similarly, the development of *ni zhidao* into a discourse marker also involves lexicalization and grammaticalization. More specifically, its formation mechanisms mainly include the influence of syntactic environment and semantic conventionalization.

3.1.1. The influence of syntactic environment

Based on a large amount of corpus data, this study finds that the syntactic environment of *ni zhidao* has gone through the following four stages and has gradually developed into a discourse marker.

Stage 1: A typical subject-verb-object structure: *ni* + *zhidao* + object.

In this structure, *zhidao* is a verb with concrete lexical meaning and may be followed by a nominal object, verbal object, or clausal object. For example:

(14) This summer you and Lü Fu went to Dezhou. Why has he not returned even now? Do you know his whereabouts?¹⁴

(15) Liu Yueshi said, "What do you know? If it were not for me, you would not have even one".¹⁵

(16) Do you know what kind of person Mr. Sun is in the Republic of China? How could you slander him at will?¹⁶

In examples (14)–(16), *ni* has an actual pronominal referential meaning and refers to a specific addressee. *Zhidao* functions as the main verb of the sentence and is followed respectively by a nominal object, a verbal object, and a clausal object. Moreover, the connection between *zhidao* and the following object is tighter than the connection between *zhidao* and *ni*. The structure at this stage can be further analyzed as *ni* + [*zhidao* + object].

Stage 2: A subject-verb-object structure in which the object is usually long or preposed: *ni* + *zhidao* + object / object + *ni* + *zhidao*.

This stage remains an SVO structure. However, unlike Stage 1, when the object following *zhidao* becomes increasingly long, or when the speaker emphasizes the object following *zhidao*, the structural connection between *zhidao* and its subject *ni* becomes increasingly close, while its structural connection with the following object gradually weakens. At this point, a certain degree of phonological pause begins to appear between *zhidao* and its object. Although *ni* and *zhidao* are more closely connected structurally than in Stage 1, *ni zhidao* as a whole still functions as a subject-predicate structure. For example:

(17) You used to come to our home often. You know, there was no lake in our garden, and even the small pond had been filled in by my grandfather because I had slipped and fallen into it when I was four.¹⁷

(18) I am also doing business for you! I have just opened seven branches, you know; this is exactly when money is needed in every respect.¹⁸

In example (17), the clausal object following *zhidao*—"there was no lake in our garden"—is long. As a result, a certain phonological pause appears between *zhidao* and its object, while *zhidao* gradually moves closer to its subject *ni*. In example (18), the speaker preposes the object of *zhidao*, "I have just opened seven

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¹⁸ The Chinese corpus data are drawn from the CCL corpus.

branches", in order to emphasize it. Although *ni zhidao* at this stage still belongs structurally to a subject-predicate construction, it already differs from Stage 1: the connection between *zhidao* and its subject becomes stronger, while its connection with its object gradually weakens, and its control over the object decreases.

Stage 3: *Ni + zhidao* + clausal object containing *duo*, *duome*, or *zheme*.

As cases in which *ni zhidao* is used to emphasize the object increase, *ni zhidao* often combines with clauses containing *duo*, *duome*, or *duoshao* to form exclamatory sentences and express the speaker's subjectivity. Lü Shuxiang points out that *duo* and *duome* developed from *duoshao* [7]. Therefore, sentences containing *duo* in fact borrow an interrogative tone to express exclamatory meaning. Shi Yuzhi argues that the exclamatory meaning of sentences containing *buzhi + duoshao...* derives from the semantics of doubt expressed by *buzhi*, namely, a situation that exceeds the speaker's range of knowledge and experience, thereby giving rise to exclamatory meaning [8]. This paper argues that the source of the exclamatory use of *ni zhidao* is similar to Shi's analysis: it likewise derives from "exceeding the domain of knowledge and experience". The difference is that *ni zhidao* involves "exceeding the addressee's domain of knowledge and experience". That is, the speaker believes that the content referred to by *ni zhidao* exceeds the addressee's knowledge and experience, and therefore uses *ni zhidao* to express exclamatory meaning and highlight subjectivity. For example:

(19) I'm sorry, you know that I am just this blunt! I have no reason at all to go with you, a cripple, to take part in a match!¹⁹

(20) Buffalmacco, you know how fond Calandrino is of petty advantages. If someone else pays the bill, he drinks one cup after another.²⁰

(21) Do you know how much I love you and how unable I am to live without you? Please, don't break up with me, okay?²¹

In example (19), the extent of the speaker's bluntness exceeds what the addressee had previously assumed. In example (20), the extent to which Calandrino likes petty advantages also exceeds the addressee's scope of understanding. In example (21), the speaker believes that the degree to which he or she loves the addressee and cannot live without the addressee is not within the addressee's scope of knowledge. Therefore, these examples co-occur with *duome*, *zheme*, and *duo*, respectively, to express exclamatory meaning and highlight the speaker's subjectivity. On the surface, the speaker uses *ni zhidao*; in effect, however, the speaker intends to express that the addressee "does not know". The construction expresses the speaker's subjectivity and carries strong emotional coloring. At this point, the bond between *zhidao* and *ni* becomes tighter, the pause between *ni zhidao* and the following component becomes more salient, and the semantic bleaching of *ni zhidao* becomes more advanced.

Stage 4: [*Ni + zhidao*] + clausal object.

As *zhidao* gradually loses control over the following clausal object and becomes increasingly closely connected with its subject, the overall semantics of *ni zhidao* becomes increasingly bleached. The following clausal object becomes more independent and rises to become the main body of the sentence. Formally, *ni zhidao* is often separated from the clausal object by a comma and becomes an independent component. Its syntactic position is flexible: it may appear sentence-initially, sentence-medially, or sentence-finally. Functionally, *ni zhidao* no longer participates in sentence construction as a sentence component. Semantically, it no longer has propositional meaning but only procedural meaning, and it does not affect the truth value of

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the proposition. It can therefore be omitted without affecting the grammaticality or truth value of the sentence, and it basically possesses the core features of a discourse marker. For example:

(22) Oh, my name is Sima Ling—no, no, I am not joking with you. That really is my name. You know, no one can decide for themselves what name they are given.²²

(23) Q: When entering a number whose first digit is 0 in Excel, why does the 0 disappear after pressing Enter?²³ A: The cell is in numeric format by default. You know, in a number, apart from the decimal point, 0 cannot appear in the initial position. To display it correctly, you can enter an apostrophe before entering 0.

(24) She gently pushed him away. "We may still run into each other by accident. Shanghai is small, you know".²⁴

In examples (22)–(24), *ni zhidao* occurs sentence-initially, sentence-medially, and sentence-finally, respectively, and points to preceding or following information. The context shows that *ni zhidao* in these examples has only procedural meaning and no propositional meaning. It can be deleted without affecting the truth value or grammaticality of the sentence, and it is used as a typical discourse marker.

3.1.2. Semantic conventionalization

Semantic conventionalization is another important mechanism by which *ni zhidao* develops into a discourse marker. Dong Xiufang points out that discourse markers are the result of the conventionalization of repeatedly used discourse elements [9]. The discourse marker *ni zhidao* originates from a complete clause and can, to some extent, be regarded as a fixed expression with special semantics. In discourse-marker uses of *ni zhidao*, *ni* no longer refers to a specific individual but instead refers generally to the addressee as a broad communicative role. The lexical meaning of *zhidao* in *ni zhidao* also gradually generalizes: it develops from the cognitive domain to the discourse domain, and from cognitive meaning to textual meaning. Both *ni* and *zhidao* undergo semantic bleaching until only procedural meaning remains. Eventually, *ni zhidao* becomes an abstract discourse marker that can be deleted without affecting the truth value or grammaticality of the sentence. For example:

(25) You know the answer to this question. Why did you leave it blank?²⁵

(26) You two have been together for several years. You know what kind of person he is: pragmatic, steady, and never making empty promises. Do you still need to ask others whether he is worth entrusting your life to?²⁶

(27) It is already quite good that he was admitted to a first-tier university. You know how difficult it is to be admitted to a Project 985 or Project 211 university in Hebei!²⁷

(28) You said your husband is studying for a PhD. I envy him and admire him very much. You know, studying is very hard, and some majors are dull, tedious, and mentally exhausting.²⁸

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In example (25), *ni zhidao* is a subject-predicate structure followed by a nominal object. Here, *zhidao* functions as the main verb and has concrete lexical meaning, meaning "to have knowledge of a fact". *Ni*, as a personal pronoun, specifically refers to the addressee. In example (26), the speaker preposes the object in order to emphasize it, and the meaning of *zhidao* has already begun to weaken. In example (27), the sentence formed by *ni zhidao* and *duome* jointly expresses the speaker's exclamatory meaning, and *ni zhidao* as a whole is used to highlight the speaker's subjectivity. In example (28), the meaning of *ni zhidao* is completely bleached. It has developed into a discourse marker, has only procedural meaning and no propositional meaning, and can be omitted without affecting the grammaticality or truth value of the sentence.

3.2. Motivations for evolution

Motivations for evolution refer to the factors that contribute to the emergence or change of a linguistic phenomenon. Through a conversational analysis of *ni zhidao*, this study argues that the main motivations that drive *ni zhidao* from non-subjectivity to subjectivity and then to a discourse marker include subjectification, intersubjectivity, and high-frequency use.

3.2.1. Subjectification

"Subjectivity" refers to a property of language: discourse always contains, to a greater or lesser extent, elements of the speaker's "self". That is, when producing an utterance, the speaker may also indicate his or her stance, attitude, and emotion toward the utterance, thereby leaving traces of the self in discourse [10]. "Subjectification" refers either to the encoding of such subjectivity through corresponding structural forms or to the evolutionary process by which a linguistic form gradually acquires the function of expressing subjectivity [11]. The above analysis shows that subjectification is one of the important motivations for the development of *ni zhidao* into a discourse marker. The speaker uses *ni zhidao* to express his or her cognition, evaluation, or emotional attitude toward a proposition, thereby promoting the development of non-subjective *ni zhidao* into subjective *ni zhidao*, and finally into an abstract discourse marker with the function of expressing subjectivity.

3.2.2. Intersubjectivity

The discourse marker *ni zhidao* is intersubjective [12], and intersubjectivity is also an important motivation for its development into a discourse marker. Intersubjectivity refers to the use of specific and explicit linguistic forms by the speaker to express attention to the addressee. It is mainly reflected in the addressee's attention to the information conveyed by the speaker and to the speaker's emotional attitude. The *ni* in the discourse marker *ni zhidao* can prompt the addressee to participate in the communicative process and can call the addressee's attention to the communicative topic or the current conversational context, thereby ensuring that the addressee can more accurately interpret the real meaning of the conversation and the speaker's communicative purpose.

Initially, non-subjective *ni zhidao* indicates that the addressee knows a certain event, which may be either a completed event or an objective fact. Later, *ni zhidao* often co-occurs with *duo*, *duome*, or *duoshao* to form exclamatory sentences and gradually develops into subjective *ni zhidao*. Finally, the semantics of *ni zhidao* becomes completely bleached. The speaker uses *ni zhidao* to recall or presuppose common ground shared by the speaker and the addressee, and to express the speaker's subjective evaluation, view, or emotional attitude toward the proposition, thereby prompting the addressee to pay attention and actively participate in communicative interaction. At this point, *ni zhidao* has become fixed as a discourse marker.

3.2.3. High-frequency use

High-frequency use is also an important motivation for the formation of *ni zhidao* as a discourse marker. According to searches conducted in the Peking University Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus, *ni* occurs

2,762,727 times, *zhidao* occurs 866,649 times, and *ni zhidao* occurs 38,458 times. These data show that the high-frequency use of *ni* and *zhidao* provides a quantitative basis for the lexicalization of *ni zhidao*, while the high-frequency co-occurrence of *ni zhidao* creates favorable conditions for its development toward fixedness. In response to communicative needs between speaker and hearer, *ni zhidao* comes to be used as an integral whole. Through high-frequency use, its form gradually becomes fixed, and its meaning gradually undergoes bleaching and conventionalization. It is ultimately abstracted into a discourse marker with only procedural meaning.

4. Conclusion and further remarks

Based on a large body of corpus data and within the framework of synchronic grammaticalization theory, this paper has examined the evolutionary trajectory of *ni zhidao* in Modern Chinese. The study finds that *ni zhidao* has undergone a process of lexicalization and grammaticalization: non-subjectivity → subjectivity → discourse marker. The formation mechanisms of the discourse marker *ni zhidao* mainly include the influence of syntactic environment and semantic conventionalization, while its motivations for evolution mainly include subjectification, intersubjectivity, and high-frequency use.

This paper focuses on the *ni zhidao* construction and excludes related forms such as *ni zhidao ma* and *ni zhidao ba*. It aims to provide a more precise description of the usage of *ni zhidao* and to avoid the problem of overly coarse-grained analysis in previous studies. At the same time, this paper presents the evolutionary trajectory of *ni zhidao* in a relatively clear and complete manner and reveals its formation mechanisms and motivations for evolution, thereby deepening our understanding of *ni zhidao*. Due to limitations of space, however, the functional analysis of *ni zhidao* will be discussed in a separate study.

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