A Finer-Grained Classification of the Morpheme *ke* in the “*ke*+X” Adjectives

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Abstract.
This paper reanalyzes the morpheme *ke* in the “*ke*+X” adjectives and categorizes these adjectives into four classes according to their different degrees of lexicalization. This paper also argues from the perspective of grammaticalization that bound morphemes can also develop into affixes or quasi-affixes.

Keywords: lexicalization, grammaticalization, affix, quasi-affix

1 The classification of the “*ke*+X” adjectives

1.1 “*Ke*+X” adjectives from Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (2012)

*Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (2012)* lists 26 entries of “*ke*+monosyllabic X” that are labeled as adjectives, which are presented in (1).


While all being adjectives, the 26 words in (1) are of different degrees of lexicalization. This can be demonstrated by two tests.

Firstly, the degree of fusion between *ke* and X can be tested by examining whether morphemes can be inserted in. The test divides the 26 “*ke*+X” words into two groups. Further examination would find that all adjectives in which morphemes cannot be inserted consist of *ke* and verbal morphemes (e.g., 可爱 *ke'ai* ‘lovable’ and 可悲 *kebei* ‘deplorable’), whereas others which can be expanded consist of *ke* and non-
inal morphemes (e.g., 可意 keyi, ‘satisfactory’ → 可人意 ke+ren yi, ‘suit one’s heart’). It can be drawn that the morphemes in “ke+V” adjectives has a higher degree of fusion than those in the “ke+N” adjectives.

Secondly, the adjectives in (1) can also be tested with regard to meaning transparency, i.e. whether there is any mismatch between the compositional meanings and the meanings of the whole. This test shows that the morphemes in most of the “ke+V” adjectives have integrated as a whole, except for 3 words (可 观 keguan ‘considerable’, 靠 kekao ‘reliable’, 可取 kequ ‘desirable’). However, those in the “ke+N” adjectives are not united. In the three “ke+V” and “ke+N” adjectives, the meanings of the adjectives are just the same as the meaning combination of the two morphemes that compose the words.

In summary, the adjectives such as 可爱 ke’ai ‘lovable’ and 可怜 kelian ‘pitiful’ do not allow insertion of other constituents and their meanings do not directly come from their components, which indicates that they have a higher degree of lexicalization. Adjectives of 可 观 kequ ‘desirable’, 可取 kequ ‘considerable’ and 靠 kekao ‘reliable’ although cannot be separated, their meanings come directly from the components. So the degree of lexicalization is not as high as the first set. Whereas for the “ke+N” adjectives, ke not only has a concrete meaning, but also can be separated from N, which means this set of words has the lowest degree of lexicalization. In other words, the 26 “ke+X” words can be classified into three categories according to their degree of lexicalization, as in (2):

(2) a. ke+V

b. ke+V
可 观 keguan ‘considerable’, 可 靠 kekao ‘reliable’, 可取 kequ ‘desirable’

c. ke+N
可意 keyi ‘satisfactory’, 可人 keren ‘pleasant’

1.1 Newly-emerged “ke+X” adjectives

In addition to “ke+monosyllabic X” adjectives introduced in Section 1.1, recent studies have witnessed new nouns consisting of “ke+disyllabic verb” as attributives. Some examples are given in (3).

(3) 可折叠键盘 kezhedie jianpan ‘foldable keyboards’, 可升降平台 keshengjiang pingtai ‘lifting platforms’, 可移动屏幕 keyidong pingmu ‘movable screens’, 可再生资源 kezai sheng ziyuan ‘renewable resource’, 可持续发展 kechixu fazhan ‘sustainable development’

These words can be analyzed as [[ke+V]+N]. The N takes the head position and even if some verbal morphemes go into this position, they are coerced into nominals.