

# **The Evolution of the Suffix 子 [tsa] in the Hunan Waxiang Dialect**

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## **Chinese Abstract**

本文构拟了湘西瓦乡话的“子”从名词发展到小称的过程。从文中可以看出，瓦乡话的“子”发展成为一个很成熟的小称标志和不太成熟的名词词尾。它走了一条与普通话和湘方言中的“子”所不同的道路。

It is a general impression that in most of the northern dialects in China there are two common suffixes: 子 *zi* and 儿 *er*. 子 *Zi* can be treated as a nominalizer, and 儿 *er* is a diminutive suffix (e.g. Chao 1968: 229–243). In most of the southern dialects there is a suffix corresponding with 子 *zi* but none exists for 儿 *er* etymologically. However, this does not mean that there are no diminutive suffixes in the southern dialects. In the Xiang dialects, for example, there are diminutive suffix tsa-like forms and tɕi-like forms across many localities. Moreover, in terms of grammaticalization, the diminutive and nominalizer suffixes of some localities in Xiang went further than either 子 *zi* and 儿 *er* in Mandarin (Wu, 2002).

The modern usage of the 子 *zi* suffix is described in most of the books on grammar. However, there has been little discussion on using modern data to reconstruct the evolution of 子 *zi*, phonologically or grammatically, from a full word to a suffix. This paper will try to fill this gap by using data from the Waxiang dialect.

The Waxiang dialect is spoken in western Hunan. It is found on the boundaries of counties and in mountainous areas where the Miao (called Hmong outside China), Gelao (Kelao) and Tujia ethnic minorities live, and access used to be very difficult. Waxiang speakers are classified into different nationalities: Miao, Gelao, Tujia and Han. Waxiang is regarded as a dialect of Han by some scholars (Wang Fushi, 1982, 1985) but is considered to be a variety of the Miao language by some local people and local scholars (Zhang Yongjia & Hou Zijia 1984). Most Waxiang speakers can speak south-west Mandarin as either their first or second language.

The Waxiang dialect is a window into Archaic Chinese, because it has kept many features of that language. Some of these features are rarely found in modern Mandarin and other Han dialects (Wang Fushi 1982, 1985; Bao & Wu 1985, Wu 2000). Unless otherwise stated, the data used in this paper come mainly from my fieldwork conducted from 1998 to 2004 in Guzhang county in Hunan .

In Mandarin, 子 *zi* can be used as a nominalizer. That is, it is used to change a non-noun into a noun, e.g. the verb 钉 *ding* ‘to nail’ into the noun 钉子 *dingzi*, ‘a nail’, or to change an adjective, e.g. 瞎 *xia* ‘blind’ to 瞎子 *xiazi* ‘a blind person’. As a noun marker, it is used after a great number of nouns in which 子 *zi* is customarily present without any additional meaning, such as 房子 *fangzi* ‘house’, 椅子 *yizi* ‘chair’, 狮子 *shizi* ‘lion’. In those words, 子 *zi* can be left out without any loss of meaning. The situation in the Waxiang dialect is different. In the following sections, the usages of 子 *zi* in the Waxiang dialect will be introduced, followed by a discussion on evolution of this word in Chinese.

## 1. The usages of 子 *zi* in the Waxiang dialect

In the Waxiang dialect, 子 can be used as a full noun meaning ‘baby’ or ‘child’, as a diminutive suffix, and as a nominalizer. Unlike in Mandarin, 子 is rarely used as noun marker.

### 1.1 As a full noun

子 *zi* is pronounced [tsa<sup>25</sup>] and is used as a full noun meaning ‘baby’ or ‘child’ in the Waxiang dialect. The word for ‘boy’ is

[tsa<sup>25</sup>t<sup>55</sup>子子] and the word for girl is [ŋəw<sup>25</sup>t<sup>55</sup>女子].

## 1.2 As a diminutive suffix

子 *zi* is very active as a diminutive suffix in the Waxiang dialect. There was a transitional period when a full noun 子 *zi* became a diminutive suffix. The following examples can be treated as belonging to the transitional period:

[tsa<sup>25</sup>子] meaning ‘baby or child’:

[k<sup>h</sup>uai<sup>25</sup> tsa 犬子] dog – tsa ‘puppy’

[ka<sup>55</sup> tsa 鸡子] chicken – tsa ‘chick’

[tsa<sup>25</sup>t<sup>55</sup>子子] meaning ‘son’:

[vu<sup>13</sup> mau<sup>45</sup> tsa<sup>25</sup> tsa □□子子] frog – tsa ‘tadpole’ A box ‘□’ in this paper represents a character which lexical source is unknown.

[ziəw<sup>55</sup>t<sup>25</sup>sa 鱼子子] fish – tsa ‘fish fry’

The fruit of a plant and the plant itself have the same or a similar relationship as children and their parents:

[k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>41</sup> tsa<sup>25</sup> tsa 苦子子] chinaberry – tsa<sup>25</sup> tsa ‘chinaberry seed’

[taŋ<sup>55</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>au<sup>41-55</sup> tsa<sup>25</sup> tsa 灯草子子] rush – tsa<sup>25</sup> tsa ‘rush seed’

Some metaphorical usages are very interesting. In the Waxiang dialect, for example, the fingers on one hand are treated as a family. The thumb is the mother and the fingers are the sons:

[ciəw<sup>45</sup> ts<sup>1</sup>ŋiən<sup>13</sup> 手指娘] hand – finger – mother ‘thumb’

[tiau<sup>55</sup> ɕiəu<sup>25</sup> tsi<sup>41</sup> tsa 中手指子] middle – hand – finger – tsa  
 ‘middle finger’  
 [mai<sup>25</sup> ɕiəu<sup>25</sup> tsi<sup>41</sup> tsa 尾手指子] tail – hand – finger – tsa ‘little  
 finger’  
 [zo<sup>25</sup> mau<sup>55</sup> tsi ɕiəu<sup>25</sup> tsi<sup>41</sup> tsa 野猫子手指子] wild – cat – tsa –  
 hand – finger – tsa ‘ring finger’  
 [ka<sup>55</sup> kau<sup>55-33</sup> ɕiəu<sup>25</sup> tsi<sup>41</sup> tsa 鸡公手指子] rooster – hand –  
 finger – tsa ‘index finger’

At an earlier stage of the Waxiang dialect, [tʂa] should be treated as a root rather than a suffix. In the word [k<sup>h</sup>uai<sup>45</sup> tʂa 犬子] ‘baby dog’, for example, [tʂa] was a root and used to have a full tone, as [tʂa<sup>25</sup>], [k<sup>h</sup>uai<sup>45</sup> 犬] ‘dog’ was used as an attributive modifier. The formation of these types of words changed from [root + root] to [root + suffix] when [tʂa] lost its tonal value.

Strictly speaking, the above examples with [tʂa] are not diminutive suffixes, since the meaning of ‘baby’ is still clear. I propose that the full noun [tʂa<sup>25</sup>] started its journey to become a diminutive when there was a need to distinguish between the concepts ‘big’ and ‘small’, such as the difference between ‘river’ and ‘stream’ in English. Chinese used to have many monosyllabic words; the concepts of ‘small’ and ‘large’ were differentiated by a pair of monosyllabic forms. In other words, ‘smallness’ is a component of a word. Some examples can still be found in the Waxiang dialect:

[zoŋ<sup>13</sup>] ‘large basket carried on the back holding light objects such as corn and seeds of Tung trees’  
 [tʂaŋ<sup>13</sup>] ‘small basket carried on the back for shopping or

visiting, and for carrying a baby and various objects’



[zɔŋ]<sup>13</sup> □] Photographed at Gaofeng, Guzhang on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2003.



[tsaŋ<sup>13</sup>] Photographed at Luoyixi, Guzhang on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2001.

[ts<sup>h</sup>oŋ<sup>55</sup>] ‘small wok, for daily cooking’

[tɕ<sup>h</sup>iəw<sup>55</sup>] ‘big wok, for cooking pig’s food’

[k<sup>h</sup>a<sup>55</sup> 溪] ‘large stream or river’

[ka<sup>55</sup> 沟] ‘small stream or streamlet’

When words were shifted from monosyllabic to bisyllabic, one of the techniques of new word formation was to add a suffix. The suffix *zi* has the meaning of “smallness” which was derived from ‘baby’:

[p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> 帕] ‘long scarf’

[p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> tsa 帕子] ‘short scarf’.

In the Waxiang-speaking area, adults wear a scarf all the time regardless of the weather.



[p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> 帕] Photographed at Liang Jiaping, Luxi on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2003.



[p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> 帕白] Photographed at Guzhang county on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1998.



[p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> tsa 帕子] Photographed at Chiping, Yuanling on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1998

[mai<sup>55</sup> 门] ‘door’

[lən<sup>33</sup> mai<sup>55</sup> tsa 亮门子] ‘window’. In the Waxiang area, the windows used to be very small, hence the literal meaning ‘small door’.

[kəu<sup>55</sup>] ‘big dustpan’

[kəu<sup>55</sup> tsa] ‘small dustpan’



[kəu<sup>55</sup>] ‘big dustpan’ / [kəu<sup>55</sup> tsa] ‘small dustpan’

The one on the top left side is [kəu<sup>55</sup> tsa 𠃉子]. The one on the right side is [kəu<sup>55</sup>]

Photographed at Lianhuachi, Yuanling on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1998.

[au<sup>33</sup> 瓮] ‘big water vat’

[au<sup>33</sup> tsa 瓮子] ‘small water vat’

[sɿ<sup>33</sup> pi<sup>55</sup> 柿□] ‘persimmon’  
 [pi<sup>55</sup> tsa □子] ‘wild persimmon which has small fruit’  
 [koŋ<sup>55</sup> 柑] ‘shaddock (a type of grapefruit)’  
 [koŋ<sup>55</sup> tsa 柑子] ‘orange’  
 [mie<sup>25</sup> koŋ<sup>55</sup> tsa 米柑子] ‘mandarin’  
 [mie<sup>25</sup> 米] means ‘rice’ and can be used as a suffix to indicate something as small as rice, but is not very productive.

子 *zi* took a further step from being used as a diminutive suffix distinguishing smaller from larger objects, to being used as a suffix for small objects with no comparative function. The following are examples:

[tsau<sup>55</sup> tɕiəu<sup>41</sup> tsa 灶蚰子] ‘cricket (an insect)’  
 [fəu<sup>55</sup> tsa 蜂子] ‘bee’  
 [tiəu<sup>55</sup> tiəu<sup>55-33</sup> tsa 蜘蛛子] ‘spider’  
 [taŋ<sup>55</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>au<sup>25</sup> tsa 灯草子] ‘rush’  
 [tsa<sup>33</sup> dʒie<sup>33</sup> tsa 树截子] ‘tree trunk’  
 [lo<sup>13</sup> /no<sup>13</sup> mi<sup>45</sup> tsa □□子] ‘ant’  
 [poŋ<sup>55</sup> tsa □子] ‘small bench’  
 [p<sup>h</sup>au<sup>55</sup> tsa □子] ‘small basket carried on the back’

In summary, there were at least four steps in the evolution of diminutive 子 *zi* from a full word to a suffix in the Waxiang dialect:

**Stage one:** The sense of ‘baby’/‘child’ or its metaphorical usage was clear, and the tone quality was not lost. The word formation was [root] + [root] where 子 *zi* was a head.

**Stage two:** The sense of ‘baby’/‘child’ or its metaphorical usage was clear, but the tone quality was lost. The word formation shifted from [root + root] to [root + suffix]. This was the transitional period.

**Stage three:** The suffix [tsa] appeared after a noun to make a contrast between a smaller object and a bigger one.

**Stage four:** The suffix [tsa] appeared after a noun referring to a small object and with no comparison between large and small.

### 1.3. 子 *zi* as a nominalizer

Data from the Waxiang dialect show that 子 *zi* used as a nominalizer is not as active as it is in Mandarin. In Mandarin, 子 *zi* can be used as a nominalizer mainly for two types of words:

#### i) Verb–noun pattern

In this pattern, a noun is formed by adding a suffix 子 *zi* to a verb; for example, 钉 *ding* ‘to nail’ but 钉子 *dingzi* ‘a nail’, 梳 *shu* ‘to comb’ but 梳子 *shuzi* ‘a comb’. This also occurs in the Waxiang dialect, although not as actively as in Mandarin:

[toŋ<sup>55</sup> 担] ‘to carry’/[toŋ<sup>55</sup> tsa 担子] ‘a carrying pole’

[tsau<sup>33</sup> 罩] ‘to cover’/[tsau<sup>33</sup> tsa 罩子] ‘fog’

#### ii) adjective–noun pattern

A noun is formed by adding the suffix 子 *zi* to an adjective. For example, 跛 *bo* ‘lame’ but 跛子 *bozi* ‘a lame person’. In the Waxiang dialect, the suffix for this type of word is not [tsa] but [ti]. The lexical source of [ti] needs to be researched.

[mo<sup>55</sup>ti 麻□] ‘a person with pockmarked face’

[xo<sup>41</sup>ti 瞎□] ‘a blind person’

#### 1.4. 子 *zi* as a noun marker in the Waxiang dialect

The suffix 子 *zi* used as a noun marker is very popular in Mandarin and even more popular in the Xiang dialects. However, it is not commonly found in the Waxiang dialect. Here are two examples:

[vəŋ<sup>45</sup>taŋ<sup>13</sup>tʂa 网□子] ‘hair net’

[vu<sup>13</sup>ŋjɛn<sup>13</sup>tʂa 鹅娘子] ‘wild goose’

## 2. The evolution of 子 *zi* in Chinese

This section does not include a detailed discussion of the evolution of 子 *zi* in Chinese; however it raises questions that may shed light on the topic.

### 2.1. Reconstruction of the phonological development of *zi*

In the Xiang dialects and in many southern Chinese dialects such as Yue, the full noun for ‘baby’ or ‘child’ is 崽 *zai* [tsai], a cognate of 子 *zi*. 崽 *zai* [tsai] can be used as a diminutive as well. The nominalizer and noun marker is 子 *zi* [tsɿ]. In the

Waxiang dialect, however, there is no sound difference between the full word ‘baby’ and the suffix if the loss of tone quality is not taken into account.

As mentioned in an earlier paper (Wu 2002), it is recorded that, early in the Han dynasty (206BC–220AC), the word for ‘son’ in the northern dialects was 子 *zi*, but in the southern dialects it was 崽 *zai*. Two characters were used to represent the same word but with different pronunciations. According to the rhyme books of Middle Chinese, 子 *zi* and 崽 *zai* share the 上 *Shang* tone and the 精 *Jing* initial. They differ only in rhyme. 子 *zi* belongs to the 之 *Zhi* rhyme and 崽 *zai* belongs to the 蟹 *Xie* rhyme. There are also different reconstructions of the pronunciation for 子 *zi*; for example, [tsiə] (Li Shizhen and Zhou Changji 1999:63); [tsi’/tsi’] (Pulleyblank, 1991:420). In the dialects spoken in Hunan, the finals of the 之 *Zhi* rhyme usually have a [ɪ]-like final, and the 蟹 *Xie* rhyme usually has an [ai] or [a]-like final. However, in the Waxiang dialect, the [a] and [ɪ] co-exist in the Middle Chinese 之 *Zhi* rhyme and [a] [ɛ] and [ɤ] co-exist in the Middle Chinese 蟹 *Xie* rhyme. In table 1 below, all five words come from the 之 *Zhi* rhyme 精 *Jing* initial group. In table 2, all ten words come from the 蟹 *Xie* rhyme 精 *Jing* initial group.

Table 1. Examples of the 之 *Zhi* rhyme 精 *Jing* initial

Form	Sound	Gloss	Form	Sound	Gloss
子	tʂa <sup>25</sup>	son	寺	ʂi <sup>25</sup>	temple
丝(瓜) 丝(帕)	sa <sup>55</sup>	dishcloth gourd; silk			
字	dʒa <sup>33</sup>	character			

Table 2. Examples of the 蟹 *Xie* rhyme 精 *Jing* initial

Form	Sound	Gloss	Form	Sound	Gloss
裁	t <sup>25</sup> sa	to plan	裁(縫)	dzɿ <sup>13</sup>	dressmaker
猜	t <sup>h</sup> a <sup>55</sup>	to guess	在	dz <sup>h</sup> ɿ <sup>25</sup>	to be at
財(主)	dza <sup>13</sup>	rich man	菜	t <sup>h</sup> ɿ <sup>33</sup>	vegetable
材(木)	t <sup>h</sup> a <sup>55</sup>	wood	蔡	t <sup>h</sup> ɿ <sup>33</sup>	a surname
崽	t <sup>h</sup> a <sup>25</sup>	son	才	dze <sup>33</sup>	Just

The above phonological relationship in the Waxiang dialect shows that 子 *zi* and 崽 *zai* derived from the same lexical source. The pronunciation of [t<sup>h</sup>sa] in the Waxiang dialect can therefore provide new data for the reconstruction of the phonological development of 子 *zi*.

## 2.2. Reconstruction of the path of grammaticalization of 子 *zi*

In the *Hanyu fangyan cihui* (Wang Futang et al. 1995), 103 nouns with 子 *zi* in Mandarin are recorded across twenty representative localities. The following table shows the distribution of these nouns in Mandarin, the Changsha dialect, and the Waxiang dialect. The expression ‘no suffix’ in the table refers to a word which has no 子 *zi* suffix. For example, in Mandarin, ‘house’ is called 房子 *fangzi*, while in the Waxiang dialect, it is called 室 [tɕi<sup>41</sup>]. The expression ‘other’ means that the noun does not have a [root + (zi)] construction and is not comparable. For example, ‘wheel’ is 轮子 *lunzi* in Mandarin but 轮盘 [lən<sup>13</sup>po<sup>13</sup>] in the Changsha dialect.

Table 3. Distribution of 子 *zi* in Mandarin, Changsha and Waxiang

	Mandarin	Changsha	Waxiang
As a diminutive	1	0	5
As a nominalizer	28	28	11
As a noun marker	74	61	22
No suffix	0	2	35
Other	0	12	30
Total	103	103	103

From the table it can be seen that Mandarin and the Changsha dialect have a similar distribution of the suffix, but the situation in the Waxiang dialect is quite different. In the latter, there are five words in which 子 *zi* can be treated as a diminutive. In addition, most of words in the ‘noun marker’ category actually are words for small objects. For example, ‘pliers’ ‘tweezers’ ‘awl’ and ‘hook’ all have the suffixes [tsa] as they are in Mandarin, but not the words for ‘hammer’ and ‘axe’. Most of the words in the ‘no suffix’ category express a contrast between large and small by the presence or absence of [tsa]. For example, Mandarin 肚子 *duzi* ‘belly’ is 肚 [təu<sup>25</sup>] in the Waxiang dialect, but a child’s belly is [təu<sup>25</sup>tsa]. Mandarin 梯子 *tizi* ‘ladle’ is 梯 [t<sup>h</sup>a<sup>55</sup>] in the Waxiang dialect, but a short ladle is [t<sup>h</sup>a<sup>55</sup>tsa]. The following figure shows that Mandarin and the Changsha and Waxiang dialects are at different stages of grammaticalization of 子 *zi* from a full word to a suffix, albeit they follow the same direction. In the figure a plus sign (+) represents forms that exist but are rare. The instances of ‘+’ show the levels of activity. On the other hand, a minus sign (–) means that a certain form does not exist in a dialect at all.

Full noun >	diminutive marker	nominalizer >	noun marker
Mandarin 子 <i>zi</i>	(+)	++	+++
[tsɿ]	(+)	++	++++
[tsɿ]			
Changsha 子 <i>zi</i>	+		
[tsai]			
Waxiang 子 <i>zi</i>	+++	+	(+)
[tsa]			

The figure also shows the following:

- i) Mandarin 子 *zi* has completed its evolution from a full word to a noun marker. The earlier usage as a diminutive suffix leaves only a trace in the word 刀子 *daozi* ‘knife’.
- ii) The Changsha dialect also shows a evolution from a full word to a noun marker. 崽 *zai* [tsai], which is a cognate of 子 *zi*, has kept the diminutive meaning but is at the first stage of development since the suffix can be used only for words which contain the meaning ‘baby’, such as for baby animals.
- iii) The Waxiang dialect has not finished the journey from a full word to a noun marker. However, the suffix has developed into a mature diminutive marker.

In the Waxiang dialect, the word 子 *zi* differed from both Mandarin and Changsha in its evolution from a full word to a suffix. It would be interesting to know whether another dialect of Chinese shared the same path.

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