Functional Division Between Two Synonymous Markers in Tongling Dialect

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Abstract

"guoshi 过是" is a noteworthy form in the K-VP interrogative structure of the Tongling dialect in Anhui province of China, primarily serving as a focus question marker, a propositional question marker, and a communicative question function. In this process, a synonymous but non-graphical marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* appears, sharing the interrogative marker function with *"guoshi"* in dialogues, mainly used for propositional and communicative questions. It also adds discourse marker functions. As a discourse marker, its main functions include turn-taking, turn continuation, and interpersonal interaction, among which the interpersonal interaction function is mainly reflected in activating shared knowledge, highlighting the focus of the proposition, indicating communicative states, and self-correction. The use of *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]* in natural spoken language is related to semantic bleaching.

Keywords: Tongling dialect, guoshi, question markers, discourse markers, semantic bleaching

1. Introduction

In the Wu, Jiang-huai Mandarin, Hakka, Southwest Mandarin dialect areas, as well as in some parts of the Central Plains Mandarin, there exists a type of interrogative sentence, *"K-VP,"* (Citing Zhu Dexi's method of notation in 1989) which is not present in Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) and is semantically and functionally equivalent to the affirmative-negative or yes-no questions in MSM. The interrogative adverb *"K"* at the beginning of the *"K-VP"* interrogative structure exhibits cross-dialectal variations in phonetic or written forms, such as *"a 阿-VP"* in Suzhou dialect, *"ke 可-VP"* in Yangzhou dialect, *"hai 还-VP"* in Huaiyin dialect, *"ke 克-VP"* in Hefei dialect, and *"ge 咯-VP"* in Kunming dialect. In Tongling dialect, which belongs to the Xuancheng-Tongjing sub-dialect of the Wu language, it is marked as *"guo 过-VP."*

"guoshi 过是" is a derived interrogative word from *"guo-VP"* (Liu Danqing, 1991). VP is formed by the judgment verb *"shi"* followed by a noun or noun phrase, creating the structure *" (NP/VP) + guo + shi + NP + (PRT)?"* for asking about equality, categorization, or possession. Its semantics are similar to *"is it"*, *"right"*, or *"huh"* in MSM, and it is predominantly found in natural spoken dialogues. Concurrently, in Tongling dialect, there is a synonymous marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* without a written form, which, together with *"guoshi,"* serves the function of an interrogative marker in dialogues and adds discourse marker functions.

This study is based on 8 hours and 51 minutes of every-day conversations among native Tongling dialect speakers. The conversations were recorded and transcribed into text, from which we extracted 183 sentences containing the expressions *"guoshi"* and *"[kʰɛ³¹]"*. These sentences were categorized based on their synchronic functional manifestations. In the subsequent examples, we will appropriately revise some of the original sentences as needed for comparative analysis. This paper will analyze the distribution of functions of *"guoshi"* and *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* in the natural spoken communication of the Tongling dialect and conduct a quantitative count of the frequency of use for each function.

2. Research Background

Liu Danqing (1991) conducted a comprehensive investigation and organization, discovering a special phenomenon within the *"a 阿-VP"* sentence structure of Wu dialects, represented by Suzhou dialect. This phenomenon is found in eight instances within Suzhou dialect, and Liu analyzed the scope, nature, and grammatical-pragmatic functions of these special phenomena from multiple perspectives. Subsequently, the fixed phrase minor categories derived

from *"K-VP"* interrogative structure have been discussed in many specific dialect *"K-VP"* studies. Wang Rudong (1994) depicted and analyzed the interrogative words of *"K-VP"* sentences in Hai'an dialect; Liu Xiangbai (1997) examined the co-occurrence of *"K-VP"* with other interrogative forms in Lu'an Dingji dialect, as well as the usage patterns of two combined forms of *"ke shi 克是"*; Yuan Congrun (2006) conducted a synchronic grammaticalization analysis of *"ge chi le 各吃了"* in Wuhu dialect, Anhui; Hu Lihua (2008) discussed the use of *"ke Shi 可是,"* in Mengcheng dialect; Hou Chao (2015) even separated *"ke shi 可是"* from the affirmative-negative *"K-VP"* and considered it as a yes-no question on its own. Many scholars discuss the special phenomena of *"K-VP"* in a specific dialect when studying it, but the synonymous marker that shares the function with *"guoshi"* in Tongling dialect has not been addressed in these studies. This paper will analyze the functional distribution of *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]* in natural spoken communication of Tongling dialect based on their usage in everyday interactions.

In Mandarin, the phrase *"shi bus shi 是不是"* primarily functions as a focus question, propositional question, and interactional question (Fang,2005). While in the Tongling dialect, *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* and *"guoshi 过是"* share the functions of the three question markers and discourse markers, constituting two significant research domains in linguistics, which are crucial for understanding the communicative functions of language. Question markers are used to express queries or seek information., whereas discourse markers are lexical items or phrases that serve to connect utterances, express attitudes, and indicate sequence (e.g. Radetzky, Paula, 2002; Fang, 2005; Liu, 2006; Dong, 2007; Lu, 2009; Li, 2013; Li, 2018; Jiang, 2021; Zhou, 2022; Xu, 2023;).

3. The Functional Roles of "guoshi"

3.1 Focus Question Marker

When the interrogative adverb *"guo 过"* and the judgment verb *"shi 是"* coalesce into an interrogative word, the structural hierarchy of the sentence shifts from the general *"guo-VP+NP"* structure of *"guo + (VP+NP)"* to *"(guoshi) + NP/VP"*. The scope of application is not limited to questioning nouns or noun phrases; almost any element within the sentence can serve as the object of inquiry, and its position within the sentence becomes more flexible. At this point, *"guoshi"* functions as a focus question marker within the sentence.

A focus question targets a specific element within the proposition, using that element as its domain and the focus of the question, asking the listener whether they are aware and requiring them to affirm or negate the focus. Syntactically, the focus of the question follows *"guoshi,"* with *"guoshi"* being adjacent to the focus, and no other elements can be interposed between them. Phonetically, the stress falls on the *"shi"* in *"guoshi,"* with secondary stress on the focus of the question.

Example (1)

A1：***guoshi*** lou xia zhe jia zuo tian ye li tou tou mo mo dao la ji

guoshi the family downstairs secretly dump the trash last night?

B1：jiu shi lou xia zhe jia o

Yes, it's the family downstairs.

A2：lou xia zhe jia ***guoshi*** zuo tian ye li tou tou mo mo dao la ji

the family downstairs secretly dump the trash ***guoshi*** last night?

B2：bu shi zuo tian, hao xiang shi jin tian

No, not yesterday, it seems like it was today.

A3：lou xia zhe jia zuo tian ye li ***guoshi*** tou tou mo mo dao la ji

the family downstairs ***guoshi*** secretly dump the trash last night?

B3：shi o, dao ge la ji xiang zuo zei yi yang

Yes, they dump the trash as if they were thieves.

A4：lou xia zhe jia zuo tian ye li tou tou mo mo guoshi dao la ji

the family downstairs secretly ***guoshi*** dump the trash last night?

B4：dui o, zhe jia ren jiu shi lan de la ji fen lei

Right, this family is just too lazy to sort their garbage

A5*lou xia zhe jia zuo wan shang tou tou mo mo de dao **guoshi** la ji

*the family downstairs secretly dump **_guoshi_** the trash last night?

In the examples provided, the foci of the questions are _"the family downstairs," "last night," "sneaking around,"_ and _"taking out the trash,"_ respectively. The position of _"guoshi"_ changes, as does the focus of the question following it, and the content that requires a response from the listener also varies. It is noteworthy that the question marker _"guoshi"_ cannot appear between the verb at the predicate center and the object it governs. To form a valid sentence, one must append a _"de"_ after the original predicate center, nominalizing it and transforming _"guoshi"_ into a new predicate center.

3.2 Propositional Question Marker

"guoshi" can sometimes function as a propositional question marker within a sentence, taking the entire proposition as its domain for questioning. Syntactically, the position of _"guoshi"_ is relatively flexible, and the focus does not change with the shift of the question marker; phonetically, _"guoshi"_ is phonetically weakened, with the initial consonant of _"shi"_ being significantly reduced in aspiration, and the vowel in the rhyme of _"shi"_ showing a tendency toward centralization, with the stress placed on the predicate center of the sentence.

Example (2)

A1：**_guoshi_** dui men jia xiao ren qian ji tian qu ao da li ya liu xue le

A2：dui men jia xiao ren **_guoshi_** qian ji tian qu ao da li ya liu xue le

A3：dui men jia xiao ren qian ji tian **_guoshi_** qu ao da li ya liu xue le

 guoshi the child from the opposite house go to Australia for studies a few days ago?

B1：dui a, 9 hao gang zou

 Right, they just left on the 9th.

B2：mei you a, ni ting na ge jiang de

 No, which one did you hear that from?

Example (3)

A1：zhe ge ren **_guoshi_** nijian guo

A2：zhe ge ren ni **_guoshi_** guoshi jian guo

A3：zhe ge ren ni guo qu **_guoshi_** jian guo

 guoshi you met this person in the past?

B1：ta zhu zhe bian de shi hou lao lai wo dian li mai yan

 He used to come to my store to buy cigarettes when he lived around here.

B2：ta wo na jian guo a, bu shi jin tian gen ni yi qi jian de ma

 I haven't seen him before, didn't we meet him together today?

In the aforementioned examples, the speaker is largely uninformed about whether the neighbor's child has studied in Australia and whether the listener has previously met the person under discussion, questioning the listener about the entire proposition to confirm its truth. The proposition in question is not baseless; it is usually inferred from the preceding discourse context or the conversational setting based on existing background knowledge. The content of the proposition is somewhat predictive, but the speaker's judgment on the truth value of the proposition still relies on the listener's response.

"guoshi" as a propositional question marker is not only used to confirm the truth of related propositions but also to elicit the listener's affirmation or negation of the propositional content, which can be divided into the meanings of _"seeking permission"_ and _"politely requesting."_ However, when expressing the meaning of _"politely requesting,"_ _"guoshi"_ cannot appear at the end of the sentence.

Example (4)

Ren dou zou le, **_guoshi_** xian zai wo neng hui jia le?

Ren dou zou le, xian zai **_guoshi_** wo neng hui jia le?

Ren dou zou le, xian zai wo **_guoshi_** neng hui jia le?

Ren dou zou le, xian zai wo neng hui jia le **_guoshi_**?

Have everyone left, can I go home now **_guoshi_**?

Example (5)

*Ni na ge yang zi, ***guoshi*** dao lou xia ba tou fa jian jian a?

*With that look of yours, ***guoshi*** go downstairs and get a haircut?

Ni na ge yang zi, dao lou xia ba tou fa jian jian ***guoshi*** a?

Example (4) seeks permission from the listener, inquiring whether the speaker can go home, and the content of the permission sought is inferred by the speaker from the preceding discourse context or non-verbal factors in the conversational setting, judging that they have met the conditions to go home and thus seek permission from the listener. In example (5), *"guoshi"* expresses a polite request for the listener to get a haircut downstairs, also based on certain premises.

In both examples, whether expressing *"seeking permission"* or *"politely requesting,"* the speaker, although there is a certain degree of predictability and affirmative subjective inclination, the ultimate affirmation or negation of the proposed content cannot be determined; the response of the addressee remains the authoritative criterion.

3.3 Communicative Question Marker

"guoshi" as a communicative question marker also takes the entire propositional content as its domain, possessing both conceptual and procedural meanings. At this point, *"guoshi"* has almost lost its interrogative meaning; that is, the speaker is no longer questioning the truth of the propositional content. *"guoshi"* is used to confirm the speaker's cognition, the listener's attitude, or to express the speaker's own attitude. Syntactically, it is fixed at the end of the sentence, and sometimes a modal particle *"de"* and a reminder or inquiry particle *"ai"* are added after it. Phonetically, it is further weakened, with the vowel *[ɔ]* in *"guo"* becoming smaller in openness and the tongue position raised, evolving into *[u]*, and the consonant in *"shi"* is lost, with the vowel *[ɨ]*, still carrying an interrogative intonation.

Example (6)

A：wo jing zao ba mian tiao tang ge shao le, ***guoshi (de) ai***?

    I put less soup in the noodles today, ***guoshi (de) ai***?

B：hao xiang jing zao mian tiao shi hou le.

    It seems like the noodles are thicker today.

C：hai hao o, zai jiang le wo men jiu xi huan chi hu de ta la de.

    It's okay, besides, we like to eat the soggy ones.

Example (7)

A：wo xiang kai kong tiao.

    I want to turn on the air conditioner.

B：zhe tian jiu kai kong tiao a, bu yao dian hao de, ***guoshi (de) ai***?

    You want to use the air conditioner on a day like this? Isn't that a waste of electricity，***guoshi (de) ai***?

In example (6), *"guoshi"* is located within the speaker's turn, used to confirm the speaker's understanding and solicit the listener's attitude. The speaker has realized that they have added too little soup to the noodles they cooked, confirming this understanding with the listener, containing their own regret, hoping to gain the other's understanding, with a strong subjective tendency, not containing any doubt about the truth value of the proposition.

In example (7), *"guoshi"* is located within the listener's turn, expressing their subjective attitude. The listener already possesses the common knowledge that *"using air conditioning consumes electricity"* and does not question the truth of the proposition. *"guoshi"* in this minor sentence is a sign of a rhetorical question; the listener uses a question without doubt to strengthen the speaker's cognition of the background knowledge about *"power consumption,"* expressing their dissatisfaction with power consumption and rejecting the speaker's request to use air conditioning, with the degree of questioning approaching zero.

4. The Functional Roles of [kʰɛ³¹]

4.1 Interrogative Markers

The marker *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* serves as a question marker in natural spoken discourse, typically functioning as either a propositional question or an interactional question, addressing the entire proposition to the listener or soliciting the listener's attitude. It does not target a specific component within the proposition and lacks a distinct question

focus.

4.1.1 Propositional Questions

In propositional questions, the inquiry encompasses the entire proposition and is used to confirm the truthfulness of the relevant proposition. Syntactically, *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* appears at the end of the sentence; phonetically, it is weakened and does not form an independent prosodic unit, with the stress placed on the preceding predicate.

Example 8

A：dui men jia xiao hai qu ao da li ya liu xue le*[kʰɛ³¹]*

the child from the opposite house go to Australia for studies, *[kʰɛ³¹]*?

B：dui a, zuo tian gang zou. / mei you a, ni ting shui shuo de.

Yes, they just left yesterday. / No, who told you that?

Example 9

A：zhe ge ren ni guo qu jian guo*[kʰɛ³¹]*

Have you seen this person before, *[khɛ31]*?

B1：ta zhu zhe bian de shi hou lao lai wo dian li mai xiang yan, yi mai jiu yi zheng tiao.

He used to come to my shop to buy cigarettes all the time, and he would buy a whole pack at once.

B2：ta wo na jian guo a, bu shi jin tian gen ni yi dao jian de ma?

How could I have seen him? Didn't I just meet him with you today?

In the aforementioned examples, the speakers are largely unaware of whether the neighbor's child has gone to study in Australia or whether the listener has previously met the person in question. They inquire about the entire proposition to confirm its truthfulness. The questions posed regarding the relevant propositions are not entirely unfounded; they are typically based on prior discourse context or other conversational settings, drawing on existing background knowledge. However, these inquiries carry a degree of predictability and a subjective inclination towards the proposition being true, resulting in a relatively weak degree of questioning. Ultimately, the speaker's judgment about the truth value of the proposition relies on the listener's response.

4.1.2 Communicative Questions

The interactional question marker *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* also encompasses the entire proposition and possesses both conceptual and procedural meanings (Blakemore，2002). However, it does not query the truth of the proposition; instead, it is used to confirm the speaker's understanding, express their attitude, or solicit the listener's perspective. Syntactically, it appears at the end of the sentence, and phonetically, it retains an interrogative intonation without forming an independent prosodic unit.

Example (10)

A：wo zhe jiao zi pi hou le *[kʰɛ³¹]*?

Are these dumpling skins too thick, *[kʰɛ³¹]*?

B：hao xiang shi hou le

They do seem a bit thick.

C：hai hao ba，mei you duo hou，zai jiang le ni mei mei xi huan chi hou yi dian de

They're fine, not too thick. Besides, your sister likes them a bit thicker.

Example (11)

A：wo xiang kai kong tiao

I want to turn on the air conditioning.

B：zhe ge tian kai shen me kong tiao，bu yao dian hao de *[kʰɛ³¹]*

In this weather, why would you turn on the air conditioning? It's a waste of electricity, *[kʰɛ³¹]*?

In example (10), the marker *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* appears within the speaker's turn, serving to confirm the speaker's understanding and to solicit the listener's attitude. The speaker has realized that the dumpling wrappers they purchased are too thick and seeks to confirm this understanding with the listener. This inquiry also conveys an apology, expressing a desire for the listener's understanding, while exhibiting a strong subjective inclination and a

weak degree of questioning.

In example (11), the marker appears in the listener's turn, expressing their subjective attitude. The listener already possesses the common knowledge that *"using the air conditioner consumes electricity,"* and thus does not question the truth of the proposition. Here, *"[kʰɛ³¹]"* functions as a marker of rhetorical questioning, reinforcing the speaker's background knowledge regarding electricity consumption. The listener expresses dissatisfaction with the idea of consuming electricity and counters the speaker's request to turn on the air conditioner, resulting in a questioning degree that approaches insignificance.

4.2 The Definition of the Discourse Marker [kʰɛ³¹]

In addition to functioning as a question marker, the expression *[kʰɛ³¹]* in the Tongling dialect has another set of uses. For example,

> Example (12)
>
> A：ni xiang xiang, 60 ni dai jia lian dian shi dou mei you, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***, geng bu yao jiao shen me dian nao le.
>
> Just think, in the 1960s, we didn't even have a television at home, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***, let alone a computer.
>
> B：bu ke shi ma.
>
> You're right.

in example (12), the speaker presents the content of the conversation without any interrogative semantics, and there is no requirement for the listener to provide affirmative or negative responses or to express their opinions and attitudes. Here, *[kʰɛ³¹]* exhibits relative independence within the turn, not affecting the truth conditions of the topic.

Analyzing the characteristics of discourse markers as summarized by Yin Shulin reveals several key aspects: (1) Phonetic: *[kʰɛ³¹]* forms an independent intonational unit, with brief pauses occurring before and after it; (2) Syntactic: *[kʰɛ³¹]* maintains relative independence and can stand alone as a turn. When included in a turn, regardless of its position within the sentence (whether in the middle or at the end), it does not combine with adjacent syntactic units to form larger syntactic structures, and its omission does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence; (3) Semantic: *[kʰɛ³¹]* conveys procedural meaning, and the propositional content or truth conditions of the statement in which it appears remain unaffected; (4) Pragmatic: The primary function of *[kʰɛ³¹]* is to regulate and monitor discourse, exhibiting reflexivity and lacking an interrogative function; (5) Stylistic: *[kʰɛ³¹]* is used in everyday natural spoken discourse within the Tongling dialect.

Liu Liyan (2005) defines discourse markers as a specific type of function word (or phrase) unique to interactive spoken communication. They possess relative syntactic independence and lack conceptual meaning in spoken discourse, conveying only procedural meaning, reflecting the metapragmatic awareness of the cognitive subject (Risselada & Spooren, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Redeker, 1991). Yin Shulin (2012) defines discourse markers as expressions that have independent intonation and encode procedural information used to regulate and monitor verbal communication. Heine (2013:1209) proposed five prototypical properties of discourse markers: (1) they are syntactically independent from their environment; (2) they are typically set off prosodically from the rest of the utterance; (3) their meaning is non-restrictive; (4) their meaning is procedural rather than conceptual-propositional; (5) they are non-compositional and as a rule short. The usage of *[khɛ31]* in the Tongling dialect aligns with this definition of discourse markers.

4.3 The Functional Roles of the Discourse Marker [kʰɛ³¹]

In the Tongling dialect, *[kʰɛ³¹]* serves as a discourse marker with functions of turn-taking, turn continuation, and interpersonal interaction, reflecting the metapragmatic awareness of the communicative participants from different perspectives.

4.3.1 Turn-Taking Function

In natural spoken communication, the completion of a conversation requires the speaker and listener to alternate turns, facilitating the transmission of new and old information between them to achieve the ultimate communicative goal. In dynamic oral interactions, the allocation of turns is made spontaneously. To prevent pauses or overlapping speech that could disrupt the coherence of the conversation, the speaker uses *[kʰɛ³¹]* at the end of a turn to signal the conclusion of their turn and to invite the listener to begin the next turn.

> Example (13)
>
> A：wo ta gen na neng bi a, ren jia jia li shen me tiao jian, lu duo shun na, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***.

      I can't compare with her, what conditions her family has, how smooth her path is, right?

B：hua ye bu neng zhe me jiang, ni zi ji chuang ye bi ta du li duo le.

      You can't say that, you're much more independent by starting your own business.

A：wo zhe ye shi bei po de, na ge bu xiang shu shu fu fu zai jia dai zhe.

      I'm also forced into this; who wouldn't want to stay comfortably at home.

In example (13), *[kʰɛ³¹]* appears at the point of turn transition, signaling the end of the current turn and serving as an invitation for the next turn. The roles of the participants shift, allowing the listener to initiate a new turn. Phonetically, *[kʰɛ³¹]* is positioned outside the propositional structure, forming an independent intonational unit with emphasis.

Additionally, *[kʰɛ³¹]* can be used to assign a turn to a third party outside the immediate dialogue, inviting them into the conversation, typically occurring alongside vocatives.

    Example (14)

A：jin tian zai jia xie zhe ne.

      I'm taking a break at home today.

B：en ne.

      Mm-hmm.

A：wo gang kan da ma lu na bian de chao shi yi dui ren ei.

      I just saw a crowd of people at the supermarket across the street.

B：o jin tian gao huo dong, sao ma song dong xi.

      Oh, there's a promotion today, scanning the code and giving you free stuff.

A：ni gen ni nai nai gan ma bu gen tamen yi dao qu a?

      Why don't you and your grandma go with them?

B：women bu xiang tan na ge xiao pian yi, hai ji de yao si, (turning to C) nai nai, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***.

      We don't want to take that small advantage, it's too crowded, (turning to C) Grandma, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***.

C：jiu shi jiang.

      That's right.

In this example, *[kʰɛ³¹]* does not serve an interrogative or questioning function; rather, it indicates the speaker's desire for the listener to express agreement or alignment. The content preceding *[kʰɛ³¹]* is known to the speaker and does not require a response. It is important to note that although a third party may not have participated in the earlier part of the conversation, they must be present in the discourse context to receive the new information; otherwise, even if invited, they will be unable to initiate a turn and engage in the conversation.

4.3.2 Turn Continuation Function

During active conversations, both participants are concerned with the coherence of the turn and the overall dialogue. However, natural spoken communication is often organized spontaneously, and various degrees of interference may occur in the discourse context. The communicative participants face limitations in their thinking, cognition, and linguistic expression. In such cases, the speaker employs certain strategies to organize and connect their speech, ensuring the continuity of the turn. In the natural spoken discourse of the Tongling dialect, speakers typically use the discourse marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* to maintain the continuity of their turn and the coherence of the content.

    Example (15)

A：mu ma, zhe ge yong rong fu wo zhuan men zhao cai feng zuo de, yi shang li mian de yong rong bi wai mian mai de dou duo xie, ni dian dian zhe fen liang, *[kʰɛ³¹]*, xuan de dou shi hao ya rong, dong tian chuan bu xiao hao nuan huo.

      Mom, I had this down jacket made by a tailor, there's more down in it than in those bought outside, feel this weight, *[kʰɛ³¹]*, I chose good duck down, it's so warm to wear in winter.

B：a ya gao zhe me fan ma gan ma o.

      Oh, why go through such trouble?

A：ai yo, ni bu dong xian nian dong tian hao leng o.

Ouch, you have no idea how cold it is this winter.

When a turn is lengthy, the speaker may need to recall and think simultaneously. In instances where cognitive gaps create linguistic pauses, the discourse marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* is used to fill these gaps, allowing for brief moments of thought while maintaining the coherence and fluidity of the current turn's content and form.

4.3.3 Interpersonal Interaction Function

The interpersonal interaction function of *[kʰɛ³¹]* primarily serves to mark the interactive status of the communicative participants. As the turns of both parties continuously alternate, the participants coordinate and signal to each other, employing certain strategies to capture the other's attention and remind them of their engagement in the conversation.

4.3.3.1 Activating Shared Knowledge

When the speaker discusses a particular proposition, they assume that the background knowledge is shared by both parties. However, it is essential to ensure that the listener's background knowledge is in an activated state, paying attention to whether the listener is receiving the information and truly understanding the content of the turn and the speaker's intentions. The discourse marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* is employed to convert background information from a dormant state in the listener's cognitive context to an activated state, prompting the listener to synchronize with the speaker during the conversation.

Example (16)

A：xian zai qian bu zhi qian luo, yuan xian yi bai kuai qian hao zhi qian, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***, xian zai sui bian mai dian shen me dong xi jiu hua guang le.

Money is not worth much now, a hundred yuan used to be valuable, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***, now it's gone after buying anything casually.

B：guo qu yi jin zhu rou cai ji mao qian, yi ge yue wo dou hua bu liao yi bai.

A pound of pork used to be just a few dimes, I couldn't spend a hundred in a month.

The speaker uses *[kʰɛ³¹]* to activate the listener's understanding of the shared information that *"during the period when the renminbi had not depreciated, currency of equal denomination could buy more goods,"* bringing the background knowledge into the current communicative context. Once the listener's background knowledge is activated, they can take over the turn and continue the conversation on that topic.

4.3.3.2 Highlighting Propositional Emphasis

When the speaker needs to emphasize certain content in their discourse, they use *[kʰɛ³¹]* to remind the listener to focus on the key points. The emphasized content is recognized by the speaker as something both parties should acknowledge, but the listener may not necessarily agree. Therefore, in the turn, both the content preceding *[kʰɛ³¹]* and *[kʰɛ³¹]* itself carry emphasis, serving a dual function of reinforcement.

Example (17)

A：cong wu han hui lai de, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***? hai bu cheng ren, ni zhe shi gei guo jia tian ma fan ni ge xiao de?

Back from Wuhan, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***? Still not admitting it, do you realize you're causing trouble for the country?

B：wo you mei chu guo men, zai jia ge li hai bu xing a?

I haven't gone out, can't I just stay in quarantine at home?

Example (18)

A：fei yao chu lai gen ni jia li ren zuo dui, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***?

You have to come out and oppose your family, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***?

B：bu shi zuo dui hao bu hao! wo jiu shi bu xiang zai xiao cheng shi dai, wo zai hang zhou de gong zuo shi gao she ji gao de hao de hen.

It's not opposition, okay! I just don't want to stay in a small city; my design studio in Hangzhou is doing very well.

For instance, in example (17), the speaker knows that the listener returned home from Wuhan during the pandemic. In example (18), the speaker perceives the listener's actions as *"opposing their family."* To highlight the key propositions of *"returning from Wuhan"* and *"being at odds with family,"* the speaker uses the discourse marker

[kʰɛ³¹] to emphasize these points, reinforcing their dissatisfaction and reprimanding tone, thereby expressing condemnation towards the listener.

4.3.3.3 Indicating Communicative Status

In interactive communication, when the listener consistently maintains a state of receiving information, they may employ certain strategies to indicate their engagement and attentiveness to the speaker's conveyed content, in accordance with the principles of cooperation and politeness. The discourse marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* serves as one such strategy, functioning as a feedback signal from the listener to the speaker in the natural spoken discourse of the Tongling dialect. This type of *[kʰɛ³¹]* typically stands alone as a sentence, carries emphasis, and adjusts its intonation in response to the positive or negative content of the speaker's message.

Example (19)

A：qu nian chun jie wo quan jia dou qu hai nan du jia le, bu xiao hao shu fu.

Last Spring Festival, our whole family went to Hainan for a vacation, it was incredibly comfortable.

B：***[kʰɛ³¹]***!

A：yao bu ni men jia jin nian ye gen wo men yi qi ba.

How about your family joins us this year?

B：wo hui qu wen wen o.

I'll ask when I get back.

Example (20)

A：ting jiang ta shu shu qian ji tian zhu yuan le.

I heard his uncle was hospitalized a few days ago.

B：***[kʰɛ³¹]***!

A：wo xing qi liu yao qu yi yuan kan kan.

I'm going to the hospital on Saturday.

B：na wo yao bu yao ye qu a?

Should I go too?

A：dou xing, kan ni dao shi hou ge you shi jian ba.

It's up to you, see if you have time then.

For instance, in example (19), the listener is attentively engaged with the speaker's content and is interested but does not provide an evaluation. According to the principle of cooperation, feedback is necessary; however, using *"oh"* or *"um"* as feedback does not adequately convey the listener's level of attention. Following the principle of politeness, the listener provides a positive response by using an emphasized and rising intonation *[kʰɛ³¹]*. In example (20), similarly, the speaker's content carries a negative implication, resulting in a descending intonation for *[kʰɛ³¹]*.

4.3.3.4 Self-Correction

In everyday conversation, due to the asymmetry of information between communicative participants, misunderstandings of the discourse content can sometimes arise. According to the principles of cooperation and politeness, when misunderstandings occur, communicative participants will engage in corrective actions. When the speaker or listener encounters non-standard expressions, inadvertent misuse of language forms, or misunderstandings during a conversation, they will correct these issues, which can take the form of self-correction or other-correction. The marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* typically serves as an indicator of self-correction, appearing in the turn after the corrected content.

Example (21)

A：wo han ni mai jian yang, ni zai zhe kan dian shi?

I asked you to buy soy sauce, but you watching TV here?

B：zao mai lo, ni kan chu fang na ge gui zi li.

I bought it already, look in the kitchen cabinet.

A：o, mai le, ***[kʰɛ³¹]***, mai le jin wan jiu neng chao cai le.

Oh, bought it, **[kʰɛ³¹]**, now we can cook tonight.

in example (21), the listener first corrects the speaker's misunderstanding. Upon realizing this, the speaker provides a self-supplementing correction, restating the core content from the listener's correction and subsequently adding the correction marker *[kʰɛ³¹]* to indicate that the misunderstanding in the communication has been resolved.

5. Discussion

Based on the analysis presented above, *"guoshi"* serves as a focus question marker, a propositional question marker, and a communicative question marker, while *[kʰɛ³¹]* functions as a propositional question marker, a communicative question marker, and a discourse marker, as illustrated in the figure below:

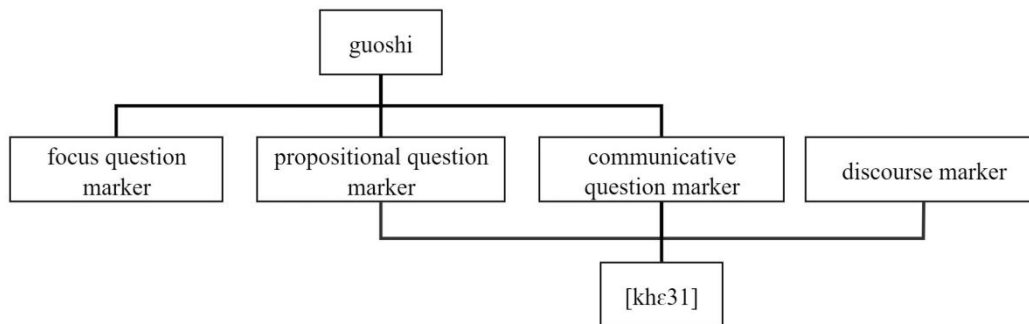Figure 1. The Division of functions between *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]*

Although there is an overlap in the functions performed by *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]*, a dialect would not employ multiple different forms to express the same function without reason, as this would violate the principle of linguistic economy. From our 8-hour and 51-minute recording of daily conversations in Tongling dialect, we extracted 183 sentences containing *"guoshi"* and its phonological variant *[kʰɛ³¹]*, and conducted a quantitative analysis of the frequency of use for each function of *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]*. The results indicate that when performing the same function, speakers exhibit different preferences. The findings are presented in the table below:

Table 1. The Frequency of Functions of *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]*

	focus question marker	propositional question marker	communicative question marker	discourse marker
guoshi	10%	15%	14%	1%
[kʰɛ³¹]	0%	8%	21%	32%

According to the trends in the functional usage frequencies of *"guoshi"* and *[kʰɛ³¹]* as shown in the chart, although *[kʰɛ³¹]* shares the propositional question marker function with *"guoshi"*, its usage frequency is significantly lower, suggesting a preference for the analytic form. As the conceptual meaning becomes more abstract and the degree of subjectivity increases, when both share the communicative question marker function, the frequency of *[kʰɛ³¹]* begins to surpass that of the analytic *"guoshi"*. When the conceptual meaning is completely lost, leaving only the function of expressing subjective attitudes as a discourse marker, *[kʰɛ³¹]* plays the primary role, and *"guoshi"* is largely phased out.

6. Conclusion

This study primarily analyzes the special usage of *"K-VP"* interrogative structure in the natural spoken communication of Tongling dialect, focusing on the functional division of labor between *"guoshi"* and its synonymous marker *[khɛ31]*. As the frequency of use of *"guoshi"* increases, its semantics also become more abstract, taking on not only the primary role of a focus question marker but also the functions of a propositional question marker and a communicative question marker. In this process, a synonymous marker *[khɛ31]* without a written form emerges, sharing the function of question markers in dialogue with *"guoshi"* and adding a discourse

marker function. The frequency of use of *"guoshi"* is inversely proportional to the degree of semantic abstraction, while the frequency of use of *[khɛ31]* is directly proportional to the degree of semantic abstraction.

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