I’m not a ghost!’: semantic analyses of some ‘emotional adverbs’ in Mandarin Chinese

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1. Introduction

This paper constitutes a first attempt to carry out a systematic and in-depth semantic analysis of a selected set of qing2gan3 fu4ci2 (‘emotional adverbs’) in Mandarin Chinese, an area that has received little attention in Western linguistic discussion. It shows that, as elusive as their meanings are, with a rigorous semantic tool, the core meanings of qing2gan3 fu4ci2 can be uncovered and stated in a clear and precise manner, making this category and its semantic contents accessible to both linguists and learners of the Chinese (Mandarin) language. The structure of the paper is as follows: in section 2, the category of qing2gan3 fu4ci2 is introduced with a general discussion of its grammatical features; section 3 introduces the analytical framework to be used in the analysis—Natural Semantic Metalanguage; and section 4 is where detailed semantic analyses, discussions and justifications are carried out.

2. What are qing2gan3 fu4ci2? Their semantic and grammatical features

The term qing4gan3 fu4ci2 (‘emotional adverbs’, hereafter QF) was first introduced in the book Zhongguo Xiandai Yufa [Modern Chinese Grammar] by Wang Li (1985/[1947]: 231), who states that

We can see that the Chinese language has a number of convenient devices for expressing emotions [qing2gan3], because it not only has emotional particles, but emotional adverbs as well. In expressing emotions, Western Languages, apart from using several intonations or a few interjections, rely only on special forms, such as a particular lexicon item or a particular word order. (my translation)

Wang Li (ibid) further explains the characteristics of QF by citing examples from Hongloumeng [The Dream of Red Mansions]:

All words that are usually in adverbial positions, yet do not have an equivalent adverb in Western languages (such as English), are most likely to be emotional adverbs. We know that emotional particles in Chinese do not have their equivalents in Western languages. The subtlety of emotional adverbs is by no means inferior to emotional particles, therefore, they too do not have equals in Western languages. The you4 in ‘Wo3 you4 bu4shi4 gui3.’ [1SG-you4-NEG-be-devil] (‘I’m NOT a devil as you would have thought.’) cannot only be translated as ‘again’. ‘At all’ does not match its nature either.

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1 I wish to thank Dr. Hilary Chappell for her valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper. For technical reasons, tones are notated by using the number system, with 1=level tone, 2=rising tone, 3=rising and falling tone, 4=falling tone, and Ø=neutral tone. Tones are not marked on proper nouns. Tone marking does not reflect tone sandhi.
The pian1 in ‘Ta1 pian1 song4 zhe4ge lai2 le.’[3SG-pian1-deliver-this-CL-come-PFV] (‘He chose to deliver this among all things.’), can neither be translated as ‘unexpectedly’, nor ‘unfortunately’, for their meanings are too concrete and the emotions far less strong than those conveyed by pian1. (my translation)

In terms of their grammatical features, QF belong to the category of xu1ci2 (lit. ‘empty words’; ‘function words’), as opposed to shi2ci2 (lit. ‘full words’; ‘content words’). They would be included in any Chinese dictionaries of ‘function words’, grouped under fiu4ci2 (‘adverbs’).2 Other linguists (e.g. Chao 1968:781) call this group of words (QF) ‘adverbs of evaluation’. I am inclined to adopt the use of QF, because of the emotive meaning components that they possess.

Words like ‘unfortunately’ and ‘unexpected’ seem to suggest that QF bear some resemblance to sentential adverbs in English, which are used to express the speaker’s opinion or attitude ‘towards the proposition that the sentence expresses or the situation that the proposition describes’ (Lyons 1977:451-452). In terms of their functions for encoding modality, QF and sentential adverbs in English share certain similarities. However, QF have a broader usage, and are much more subtle and elusive in their meaning than sentential adverbs in English. Most importantly, sentential adverbs may express the speaker’s ‘epistemic stances’ (cf. Biber & Finegan 1988; Palmer 1986), but not necessarily the speaker’s emotions. For QF, the affective component is an invariant core. It is probably because of this fact that QF are used mostly in colloquial and direct speech. They appear to behave more like communicative particles. Thus, Alleton’s term ‘adverbial words’ (Alleton 1972) seem to be more appropriate.

Curiously, this group of words is not mentioned in the chapter on adverbs in Li and Thompson’s (1981) grammar book on Mandarin Chinese. The reason for such an omission is not known. It might fall under the category of ‘movable adverbs of attitude’ (ibid:321-322). However, as we will see, some QF are movable, and some are not.

3. Methodological tool

How do we access the semantic and emotional information encoded in QF if, as noted by Wang Li, they do not have their equivalents in English (or in other languages)? The many monolingual dictionaries of ‘function words’ available in the Chinese language bear testament to the ‘unruly’ and ‘ungraspable’ nature of words of this kind.3 I shall depart from the conventional approaches, where without any exceptions, a few glosses are given along with some examples to illustrate their use. I shall try to capture the central components of the meanings of the words in question by examining their range of use. To achieve this goal, I will use Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) as the analytical framework to state and verify the meanings of selected words. The basic idea behind the theory of NSM, which was developed by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues, is that one

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2 It is not an exaggeration to say that the distinction between shi2ci2/shi2zi4 (‘full words’) and xu1ci2/xu1zi4 (‘empty words’) is the most fundamental grammatical distinction in the Chinese linguistic tradition. This tradition, however, appears to be overlooked in Western linguistic discussion of the Chinese language, and increasingly so among Chinese scholars. Chinese lexicographic tradition has always had dictionaries of ‘empty words’. It is generally believed that shi2ci2 (‘full words’) are about referents, while xu1ci2 (‘empty words’) are about meaning.

3 Dictionaries of function words are arranged largely according to the so-called part of speech—interjections, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, particles, onomatopoeitic words.
can isolate, in any natural language, a small set of lexical meanings which cannot be defined language-internally without circularity, and which has precise equivalents in all other languages. Empirical investigation has identified 60 semantic primes such as PEOPLE, SAY, TRUE, DO, THINK, WANT, GOOD, BAD, IF, BECAUSE. These primes also share a universal grammar of combination, valency, and complementation. Meanings of numerous other words and grammatical constructions can be explicated as configurations of these semantic primes, thus avoiding definition circulation.4

4. The semantic analyses

In this paper, I will focus only on the two words that Wang Li mentioned in his earlier quote: pian1 and you4.5 The examples are mainly drawn from Hongloumeng (A Dream of Red Mansions, the novel that Wang Li’s comments refer to) and other dictionaries. With its language regarded as the cornerstone of modern standard Chinese, Hongloumeng, the most popular novel in China, has been a rich source of examples for linguistic discussion and lexicographic work in modern Chinese.6In the following analysis and discussion, analysis by other linguists is also evaluated.

4.1 you4

You4 has a wide range of applications. The you4 to be discussed in this section appears only in negative sentences, signaled by a negative marker such as bu4, mei2, or mei2you3.7 The syntactic structure in which you4 occurs can be represented as PRON+you4+VPNEG.

Between you4 and the negative marker, no other constituents can be inserted. Let us start the discussion with the following example, which Wang Li used in his quote.

(1) ‘Wo3 you4 bu4shi4 gui3, ni3 jian4-le wo3 bu4shuo1 1SG YOU NEG:be demon 2SG see-PFV 1sg NEG:say gui1gui1ju1ju1 zhan4-zhu zen3me dao4 wang3qian2 pao3? well-behaved:RDP stand-stay how instead:PART towards:front run ‘I am not a ghost,’ (snapped Xifeng) ‘Why didn’t you stand to attention when you saw me? Why run away instead?’8

Without you4, ‘Wo3 bu4shi4 gui3’ would simply be an expression of a fact. If you4 does not mean again, (which is its most basic meaning—a repetition of some past action or event) or at all, then what does it mean?

Wang Li (1985:252) attributes to you4 a meaning of ‘expressing firm denial’. In my view, Wang’s observation is fundamentally correct, because ‘denial’ includes references to what

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4 See Wierzbicka 1996, Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002 for detailed information on the NSM theory and how these 60 semantic primes have been identified across typologically different languages. See also Chappell 2002 for the Chinese exponents of NSM, and Chappell 1991 for a detailed study of the meaning of word-final particle me in Mandarin Chinese using NSM framework.

5 For reasons of space, further comparisons with other words are not made here. See Ye (forthcoming) for a more complete study of QF with a larger scope.

6 For instance, two seminal grammars of modern Chinese, Zhongguo Wenfa Yaolue (Lü 1941) and Zhongguo Xiandai Yufa (Wang 1947), based their discussion largely on examples from Hongloumeng.

7 Bu4 as a negative marker can be used in most cases, except for clauses with perfective predicates (Cf. Chappell 2002:304-305).

8 The examples taken from Hongloumeng are noted with (H: chapter number). Their English translations are based on Yang & Yang 1978 with modification.
other people think and what ‘I’ think by declaring something as untrue, as suggested in example (1).

However, Wang Li’s statement is incomplete in two respects. First, the above example suggests that what the speaker denies is not what was explicitly said to the speaker, but is inferred from the addressee’s action. *You* is a denial of an unstated message on the part of the speaker. Example (2) illustrates this point.

\[
(2) \quad \text{Gou} 3 \text{er} \quad \text{name:} \quad \text{leng} 3 \text{xiao} 4 \quad \text{dao} 4: \quad \text{‘wo} 3 \text{men you4 mei2you3 shou1sui4-de} \quad \text{qin1qi4,} \quad \text{zuo4guan1-de peng2you,} \quad \text{you3 shen3me fa2zi ke3 xiang3-de.”}
\]

\[
\text{You do not have collect:tax-LIG relative make:official-LIG friend have what way}
\]

\[
\text{‘[‘You should think of some way, otherwise money will not find its way to our family.’] There are no tax-collectors in my family and no mandarins among my friends. What way could there be of laying my hands on some money?’ sneered Gouer.}
\]

In this example, the denial of having rich relatives and friends was directed at the addressee’s suggestions of borrowing money from them. It involves a process of inference. The fact that what *you* denies is an unstated and implied message explains why it can also respond to someone’s action, as reflected in example (1). Therefore, the function of *you* is to counter an unstated expectation. It spells out the addressee’s intention, and expresses the speaker’s disapproval or disgust at such a thought. Without *you*, the speaker simply states an objective fact without conveying any emotion.

The second aspect where Wang Li’s analysis is incomplete lies in the fact that the element of denial (the notion of ‘not true’) is, more or less, embodied in the negation. As its meaning cannot be understood independently from the syntactic construction, the meaning of the whole syntactic construction in which *you* occurs should be explicated, as follows:

\[
\text{YOU (PRON + YOU + VP_{NEG})}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(a) & \quad \text{I know now: you think something (X)} \\
(b) & \quad \text{I think: this (X) is not true} \\
(c) & \quad \text{I did not think someone like you could think something like this (X)} \\
(d) & \quad \text{I feel something bad because of this}
\end{align*}
\]

Component (a) indicates that the speaker’s knowledge of somebody’s intention is not explicitly expressed by the person, but is inferred by the speaker. It implies that ‘I know this not because you said so’. Component (b) indicates the speaker’s denial of the speaker’s assertion of something being untrue. Components (c) and (d) expresses a bad feeling on the part of the speaker, and a ridiculing tone. This makes *you* compatible with *leng3xiao4* (lit. ‘cold laugh’; ‘sneer’) in example (2).

In her dictionary of function words, which is targeted at Chinese language learners, Wang Huan explains *you* as ‘used in a negative sentence to indicate that since the fact is so, the conclusion will naturally be as expected’ (H Wang 1996: 349). Her explanation seems to provide an explanation as to why the use of *you* often leads to a self-explanatory
rhetorical question, as suggested in the above examples. Wang’s point is sufficiently accounted for by components (c) and (d). However, her focus is not quite right.

It is important to note that the explication is framed in the first-person format. QF convey a subjective attitude, which has illocutionary force. To some extent, they are like intonations, which inherently have a first-person meaning (cf. Wierzbicka 1991:163). This subjective attitude can best be reflected in the first-person format, which models the attitude either conveyed through first-person utterances or attributed to the speaker.

4.2  **PIAN1**

In the next section, I will focus on pian1, which was also mentioned by Wang Li. The syntactic behaviour of pian1 in an affirmative sentence differs from that in a negative sentence. In the affirmative sentence, its reduplicated form pian1pian1 or other variations such as pian1sheng2 can replace the monosyllabic pian1. Thus, the following discussion will be divided into two parts pian1,pian1pian1 and pian12. The distinction between pian1 and pian12 will be discussed in 4.2.2.

4.2.1 pian1/pian1pian1

(3) ‘Ai! Jin1er pian1pian1 lai2-le         ge Liu2lao3lao.’
INTJ today PIANPIAN come-PFV CL name:granny (H, 7)
‘Ai! Granny Liu would choose today to call [and I put myself out running here and there for her].’

Pian1/pian1pian1 can occur in sentence-initial position preceding the topic, as well as after the topic of a sentence. The meaning of pian1/pian1pian1 will be proposed first, followed by the justification of the explication.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pian1/pian1pian1} \\
(a) & \quad \text{I think: something happened} \\
(b) & \quad \text{this is bad} \\
(c) & \quad \text{I don’t want things like this to happen} \\
(d) & \quad \text{I know that it did not have to happen like this} \\
(e) & \quad \text{when I think about this, I feel something bad}
\end{align*}
\]

Component (a) and (b) together reflect a strong evaluative element, which suggests that what happened is perceived as a bad event in the view of the speaker. A component such as ‘something bad happened’ would narrow the focus to ‘something that happened’. In most cases, the event has a specific agent as a reference point. However, a component of ‘someone did something (bad)’, does not cover a death situation, as exemplified in (4):

(4) ‘Zhi3 ke3lian2 wo3 zhe4 mei4mei zhe4yang4 ming4 ku3, only pity 1SG this younger sister this:way fate bitter 
zen3me ta1 ma1 pian1 jiu4 qu4shi4-le.’
how 3SG mother PIAN emphatic:PART leave:world-PFV (H, 5)
‘But poor little cousin! What a cruel fate to lose your mother so young’ [with that she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief].

Neither does it include a more general situation where specific agents are absent, as in (5).
Component (c) indicates the volitional rejection of the event in general: I would want that something like this not to have happened (‘would’ however is not a universal concept). Note that it is ‘I do not want things like this to happen’, not ‘I DID not want something like this to happen’. The latter indicates a situation that is against one’s expectation. There may well be such cases. However, there are other times where there are no expectations involved. The rejection of the event is not so much due to the fact that the event is opposite to what is expected; rather it is due to its being contrary to one’s will or wish. This distinction is captured in example (6), wherein the speaker is not in a position to have expectations.

(6) “Ke3ken4 wo3 pian1 shen1yu2 qing1han2 zhi1 jia1.”
regrettable 1SG PIAN be born:LOC simple:poor LIG family (H, 7)
‘Why did I have to be born into a poor family [and so unable to have him as an intimate friend?]’

The sting of pian1pian1 comes from component (d). It indicates that what happened could have been avoided because there were other alternatives (‘something else could have happened’). The availability of other choices is also evident in example (7):

(7) ‘Pian1 you4 pai4 ta1 zuo4 shen3me, fang4-zhe zhe4xie
PIAN again send 3SG do what put-DUR this-CL:PL
xiao3zimen na3 yil-ge4 pai4bu4de2 pian1pian1 yao4
guy:PL which one-CL send:NEG:get PIANPIAN want
re3 ta1 qu4.’
provoke 3SG go (H, 7)
‘But why send him?’ protested Madam Yu and Keqin. ‘We’ve all those young fellows who could go. Why pick him?’

‘Like this’ in component (d) basically means ‘in this way’. The examples show a predominant tendency of ‘at that time’ as a particular way in which events choose to happen. The following example from Chao (1968) also illustrates this point.

(8) ‘Ta1 pian1pian1er tiao1 zhe4 shi2hou4er hai4qi3 bing4 lai2le.’
3SG PIANPIAN pick this time harm:rise disease come:INC
‘He would now of all times start to get sick.’(Chao 1968:781)

But ‘like this’ also includes ‘at this particular place’ (example (6)) or ‘to a particular person’ (example (4)). Pian1,pian1pian1 may express the speaker’s emotional attitude towards certain aspects of the proposition.
For the bad event to have happened the way it did among all choices, there seems to be 
unseen external forces deliberately setting themselves against the speaker’s wish. Chao 
(1968:781) glossed pian1,pian1pian1 as ‘one-sidedly, wilfully, would of all things’. This 
is consistent with the explication proposed here, and also indicates the tension between 
the inexplicable force behind the event, which determines the way the event happens among 
all possible alternatives, and against the will of the speaker.

Much perplexity often accompanies pian1,pian1pian1. One cannot help but ask why—why things had to happen the way they do. It seems that in a life-and-death situation, 
Chinese people assign the answer to the predestined ming4 (‘fate’, cf. Lin 1998/[1935]; Ye 
2001a, b), as we have already seen in example (4). Example (9) points to the same 
direction:

(9) Ying2chun1 ku1 dao4: ‘wo3 bu2xin4 wo3de ming4 na4me 
name cry say 1SG NEG:believe my MING so
bu4hao3! Cong2xiao3 mei2-le niang2, ru2jin1 pian1 you4 
NEG:good from:small NEG:PAST-CSC mother now PIAN again 
shi4 zhe4-ge jie3guo2!’
be this-CL result (H, 80)
Yingchun cried: ‘I do not believe that my fate [ming4] could be so bad: losing 
mother when I was little,… and now again it has to be such a result!’

It is exactly this ‘one-sideness’ behind the event that breeds a general bad feeling on the 
part of the speaker (component (e)), be it pity, dissatisfaction, discontent, complaining, 
blaming, resentment, or even anger. Note that ‘when I think about this’ (in contrast to 
‘because of this’) in component (e) refers to a standard situation, where a particular thought 
leads to the feeling of pian1,pian1pian1.

The English word unfortunately seems to be more factual, detached and less varied in its 
meaning than that condensed in pian1,pian1pian1 (if unfortunately does contain an 
emotive component at all). It does not imply other choices and alternatives, and lacks the 
perplexity of why things like this happened. The detached tone explains why unfortunately 
is often used in formal writings.

The closest semantic equivalent in English of pian1,pian1pian1 might be suggested by the 
underlined part from the following quote:

(10) No one knew where she came from—that is, she had vouchsafed no information-or 
how she could afford to build a real house, or why of all places she had chosen to 
do it here, or… (Malouf 1994:83)

Pian1,pian1pian1 could be considered suitable translation (except that the original 
English sentence conveys more perplexity than bad feelings).

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9 Scholars do not have a unified view as to whether unfortunately carries emotional meaning or not (cf. Hübler 1998:9),
4.2.2 pian1

Pian1 and pian1pian1 are not interchangeable in all situations. Where the agent of the event and the speaker are the same person, i.e., ‘I’, and where it refers to a future action, pian1 cannot be replaced by pian1pian1. In this situation only, pian1 can be used in an independent clause, and between ‘I’ and verbs or auxiliary verbs. The syntactic structure in which pian1 can occur is WO1SG + PIAN1/*PIAN1PIAN1 + (BUNEG) + VP.

In both the affirmative and the negative structures, pian1pian1 cannot replace pian1. Based on their different syntactic behaviour, polysemy is posited here to distinguish pian12 from pian1. Let us look at some textual examples:

(11) "Ta1 ma1 qi4-de bu4de2liao3 bian4 ku1-zhe ma4-zhe 3SG mother angry-EXT terrible then cry-DUR swear-DUR shuo1: ‘ni3 shi4 wo3de nü3er, wo3 pian1 bu4 gei3 ni2 gan3 say 2SG be my daughter 1SG PIAN NEG give you dare zen3meyang4?’ how (H, 92) Her mother was extremely angry. Crying and swearing, she said, ‘You are my daughter. I will not have you married to him. What do you dare to do!’

(12) ‘Pian1 shuo1 si3, wo3 zhe4 hui3zi jiu4 si3.’ PIAN say die 1SG this moment part die (H, 20) ['It is not lucky to say death words during the New Year time.’] ‘I’ll talk about death if I like. Death! Death! I am going to die this minute.’

(13) ‘Wo pian1 chi1, kan4 ta1 zen3meyang4.’ 1SG PIAN eat see 3SG how (H, 92) ['If I drink one little bowl full of his milk—cow’s milk—he’s going to be angry with me?] Well, I will drink it, so there! See what he dares to do.’

Interestingly, if pian1 (4.2.1) indicates that the way that the event happens goes against the speaker’s will, examples (11)-(13) present an opposite picture. It is the speaker who actively sets himself or herself against the will of ‘other minds’ by wanting to do the opposite of what the other person wants or does not want to do. In most cases, the addressee seems to be the person that the speaker is opposed to, example (13) shows quite clearly that it does not have to be ‘you’ that ‘I’ am against; it can be a third party. The explication of the meaning of pian12 is as follows:

Pian12
(a) I know: someone does not want something (Y) to happen
(b) I feel something bad because I want Y to happen
(c) I know that Y cannot happen if I do not do thing Z
(d) I can not do Z
(e) I will do Z

Component (a) shows the speaker’s awareness of the other person’s intention. It cannot be replaced by ‘I know: someone wants me to do something’, because the latter would exclude the situation in which someone’s volition is not directed at ‘me’, but directed at the happening of a particular event (in which ‘I’ can also be instrumental in the realisation of
the event’). Component (b) shows that the ill feeling on the part of the speaker stems from his or her own ‘wants’ which are the opposite of the other person’s.

Instead of helping to realise the other person’s wish, in the case of pian\textsubscript{2}, the speaker chooses to be a stumbling block, deliberately setting himself or herself against the other person by declaring their will to do the opposite of what the other person does not want to. Components (d)-(e) convey a sense of ‘deliberate opposition’ (H Wang 1996:236), ‘challenge’ (L Wang 1985:232), and ‘a toujours une nuance d’antagonisme, parfois agressif’ (Alleton 1984:29). By not complying with one’s wish and deliberately being the obstacle to someone’s wish, one essentially becomes the ‘enemy’. The provocative tone can be observed in (11) and (13). Also a strong sense of yu3qi4 (‘tone/modality’) expressed by pian\textsubscript{2} can be read throughout the explication.

It is all the more interesting to note that although there is an element of opposition from the speaker, the result of the speaker’s action is positively ‘do’, as evidenced by examples (12) and (13). This is why the explication adopts the valency option as it does. It might be said that in pian\textsubscript{2}, there is an unmarked sense of ‘doing the opposite to what one does not want to happen’. The sense of ‘not doing what one wants to happen’ is marked by the negation marker bu4.

The availability of other choices (‘I can not do Z’) seems to link pian\textsubscript{1} and pian\textsubscript{2}. They are like two sides of the same coin. In pian\textsubscript{1}, the sense of ‘one-sidedness’ resides in some inexplicable force unknown to the speaker. In pian\textsubscript{2}, the ‘one-sidedness’ comes from ‘I’, who deliberately chooses to block others’ will.

4. Summary

In this paper, I have introduced a characteristic feature of the Chinese language--qing3gan3fu4ci2 (‘emotional adverbs’) by examining both their grammatical features and their usage. Though their meanings are reputedly difficult to pin down, the detailed semantic analysis of a selected set, you\textsubscript{4} and pian\textsubscript{1}, has nonetheless shown that their meanings could be fully explicated. The analysis of you\textsubscript{4} reveals that it is not simply a ‘denial’, as commonly understood, but a denial to an unstated message, which involves an inference. Pian\textsubscript{1} suggests certain perplexity towards an event that could have been avoided because of the availability of other choices, but nonetheless happened as if deliberately against the speaker; while in pian\textsubscript{2}, the speaker goes against the other’s wish. The explications framed in NSM can not only make it easy for learners to grasp their full meanings, but also reveal the interconnections between the meanings of words.

The paper has also attested that taking into consideration of grammatical constructions is indispensable in establishing polysemy and obtaining a full and comprehensive understanding of all sides of the meanings of words under discussion.

Abbreviations

(Notation is based on Chappell 2002:317 with modification)

- EXT marker of a postverbal extent complement
- EXP experiential
- CL classifier
- DUR durative aspect marker
INC inceptive or change of state marker
INTJ interjection
LIG marker of ligature in dependency relations—*de*
LOC locative
NEG negative marker
NOM nominalising use of the particle *de*
PART particle (including adverbs)
PFV perfective aspect marker
PL plural
PL:INC inclusive form of 1st person plural
RDP reduplication
SG singular

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